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IN THE STARS

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of Master of
Arts in Creative Writing.

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Declaration : This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Date :

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The information about African star lore was obtained from various sources. I have mixed the mythology of the Zulu, Venda, Tswana and Sotho traditions and not separated them. Some of the words which Kingston uses in this regard, for example, the stars being holes in the rocky vault of the sky, come from these concepts. The sources used include Auke Slotegraaf's website, www.psychohistorian.org, the collection of legends assembled by Dr Dave Laney of the South African Astronomical Observatory, Cosmic Africa, a film produced by Dr Thebe Medupe, as well as *The Crocodile Swallows the Sun* by Maritha Snyman, Bheki Ntuli and Danisile Ntuli.

Geographical, historical and cultural information was obtained from visits to Swaziland and discussion with a wide range of people, including a chief from the Lubombo region.

The scientific information about astronomy was obtained from a variety of books and articles and I have taken liberties with some of this information to suit the needs of the story. For example, the total eclipse on Kastelorizo refers to a real event in April 2006. This has been changed to September in the novel.

Lipoid proteinosis is a rare autosomal recessive genetic condition and is referenced in many medical text books. With reference to the cultural views on madness I have read many articles but would particularly like to cite the Master's thesis of Beauty Ntombizanele Booie entitled: *Three Perspectives on Ukuthwasa: the View from Traditional Beliefs, Western Psychiatry and Transpersonal Psychology* (Rhodes University 2004).

I have used one quotation from *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* by Elizabeth Smart and have used lines from a few popular songs.

I would like to acknowledge my Supervisor, Etienne van Heerden, for his help and guidance. The last few months have been quite a journey. I would also like to thank Anne Schuster who has given me input and encouragement for many years. Lastly, I would like to thank my family: my father for always believing in me and Ian for insisting I try harder.

ABSTRACT

This is a book about the nature of reality and the illusions we embrace to smooth our paths through the vagaries of life in an uncertain world. It is about the dichotomies which exist in life and how our perceptions of life define our realities.

It uses the stars, moon and sky as a tool to explore these differences by counterpoising the two main characters as having different views of the same subject. Thus Gabriel is an astronomer with a rational scientific approach to the universe while Lena, though brought up in a scientific tradition, has, through her experiences and personality, learnt to question this approach and developed a more aesthetic and mythological approach to the universe. While this is explored in the tensions between her and Gabriel, her own reality is questioned through her interaction with Kingston Ingovazana Mabilu. Although she is drawn to his philosophical views on life, in the end she has misgivings about the extremes to which these beliefs will eventually take her and is unable to commit to cultural beliefs which are so different from her own.

The different perceptions are also explored in relation to ideas about health, medicine, causes of illness and their treatments. This brings into opposition the two prevalent paradigms in Southern Africa of the Western medical view and the alternative traditional view. The book tries to demonstrate how these are both valid with the characters showing justifications for their own points of view.

Finally, the relationship between Lena and Gabriel focuses on the delicate fragility of relationships between people, in their attempts to understand each other, to communicate, to trust and to truly know each other. In the end, these challenges may be insurmountable.

The themes of the book were inspired by the everyday dichotomies of life in Southern Africa; the different languages, religions and world views. It seemed important to explore issues of life and death, health and illness, particularly in a country where, less than a decade ago, the president of the

country declared that HIV was not caused by a virus. The constructs of madness also warranted elucidation, as different cultures view these behaviours very differently.

The second theme of astronomy versus mythology of the universe was inspired in part by Ben Okri in *Starbook* and *The Famished Road*, where magical realism opens up new ideas about the nature of reality in an African context. I also noted the tension between these ideas and the advanced technology of the Square Kilometre Array to be developed in South Africa. The book merely hints at the political past of South Africa but concentrates on the present paradigm of differing beliefs.

I have drawn from various texts to authenticate the astronomical data and have consulted a number of books and websites to obtain information about African star mythology.

IN THE STARS

A novel by

Chantal Juanita Michelle Stewart

Men of philosophical disposition are known for their constant premonition that our everyday reality, too, is an illusion, hiding another, totally different kind of reality.

Nietzsche

For my part I know nothing with any certainty but the sight of the stars makes me dream.

Vincent van Gogh

CHAPTER 1.

1.

I stand at the large window cradling a dewed wine glass in my hands. Table Mountain is silhouetted in black outline like a Rorschach spot. The moon moves from behind a cloud picking out the dog droppings in the garden, the bicycle leaning against the neighbour's shed, the rough lines of a wooden post box, and I wonder whether I will ever look at the night in the same way again.

It is hard to know where this story begins. Is it in the unclouded waters of my childhood, or in my life as it was before I learnt to see it through his eyes? Perhaps it starts with his story as I grew to disentangle it from the maze of misdirections. And even then, does his story begin now, as we each struggle to find our own salvation? In the end there is only one starting point. It is that night of stars when I met Gabriel.

Cape Town steamed gently in late summer sunshine. As I crested the hill on Eastern Boulevard with the sprawling mass of Groote Schuur Hospital on my right, the sea lay suddenly before me with the high-rises of the city centre in front of it. Every time I saw this view it made me suck in my breath. Today the moon hung low in the evening sky. I twiddled the knobs on the radio to find some music that I liked, and settled for KFM playing the Waterboys, *The Whole of the Moon*. *'I pictured a rainbow. You held it in your hands. I had flashes. But you saw the plan.'*

I glanced at the flyer on the seat beside me as I turned from Wale Street into Queen Victoria and steered into a parking place next to the golden stone walls of St Georges Cathedral.

PUBLIC LECTURE – PLANETARIUM

SOLAR ECLIPSES – HOW THEY HAPPEN

BY PROFESSOR GABRIEL POWELL

The last words of the song faded out as I turned the key *'blazing your trail. Too high, too far, you saw the whole of the moon.'* A yellow-coated car guard was at the door as soon as it opened. The Planetarium is set at the far end of The Gardens. I wanted to stretch my legs after sitting in my office all day. So I walked down the long path through the trees, past the exotic bird cages and the fish pond. The Rose Garden was in full bloom with its spiral arrangement of plants and, glancing to my right, Lion's Head reared up against the clear blue sky. I turned past the fountain to the imposing columns of the SA Museum with the dome of the Planetarium on its right. The ticket queue curled outside the door and down the steps – a few school kids, some earnest looking scientists, staff obviously from the Planetarium, a selection of interested citizens. The solar eclipse was generating quite a lot of attention. It was the first time in forty years that there was to be a total eclipse in South Africa. This was the first of a month long series of talks to generate awareness about astronomy.

A few yards from me a heated argument was going on amongst a group of three people.

"He's a brilliant scientist. Since he's joined the Astronomy Department the number of publications has rocketed. He's the only A-rated scientist there." This from a middle-aged excited looking man in a tweed hat.

"Sure, but did you hear what he had to say about the astrologers in the paper the other day?" A woman who may have been his wife said loudly. I remembered seeing a newspaper article quoting Professor Powell as talking about the 'magic' of astrology as opposed to the science of astronomy.

The third person in the argument was a short, timid looking man with a pentacle emblem on his t-shirt. "Perhaps we could invite him to our solar ritual. Maybe that would help him to integrate his life with the cosmos."

The loud woman turned to him with a scathing look but, before she could speak, the queue reached the ticket office and the interchange was stopped.

Ticket safely in hand, I wandered down to the coffee shop to while away the time before the lecture started. It was crowded and there was only one table free. I took my cappuccino, picked up a magazine and retreated to the

vacant corner table. Marissa had talked me into coming to this lecture because she thought I should expand my interests – her terminology for getting me to go out more. I really couldn't afford the time, but it was always fun going out with my sister. Now she'd backed out at the last minute because of a tummy bug.

My thoughts wandered to that phone call six months ago and the long period of negotiations and planning which had now all been finalised. I couldn't believe that in five days I would be heading off into the bush.

The phone call had come at midday on a Tuesday in the middle of winter with the Cape Town rain in its seventh consecutive day and everyone talking about the eleven day rains, which had not happened for five years. The lab was cold as ice, keeping all the growing blood samples at the right temperature. I was pipetting a sample from a plastic cylindrical test tube into a petrie dish when Marsha, the department's secretary, bustled in.

"There's a call for you, Lena. Long distance. Line's very crackly, I could hardly hear him, but he wants to talk to the doctor who's done the work on lipoid proteinosis. I figured that must be you." Marsha was a large, efficient woman who ran the department with a vast knowledge of the abilities, preferences and idiosyncrasies of the people working there.

"One case report. That's hardly work. Who is it?"

"Don't know. Earnest sounding chap. Young and enthusiastic."

The voice on the end of the line introduced himself as Dr Salim Singh. He worked as an intern at a hospital in Maputo and had been on holiday in Swaziland. While driving around the country, he had been involved in a motor car accident. The driver of the other car had had an epileptic fit and lost control of the car. Both the driver and Dr Singh had been taken to the rural hospital to be checked. While waiting in the line at the pharmacy for some antibiotics for a cut on his forearm, he noticed that the ten men in the line with him were all getting some form of medication for epilepsy and some of them were also getting anti-psychotic medication. He also noticed that all these men had a strange waxy yellow appearance to their faces and small white blisters around their eyes.

“Some memory clicked with me, Dr Brown,” his excited voice cracked down the phone line. “I remembered some connection between skin lesions and epilepsy. And then I remembered, yes, it was this article I had read right before I came to Africa. Your case. The rare disease involving the skin and calcifications in the brain.

“I had a chat with the pharmacist, nice local guy, said he’d been working there for a year after training in South Africa. He said that there was something funny going on there. In the past year or two there had been an outbreak of... of... madness, was what he called it. He even used the word bewitching.

“Of course, I don’t believe that. And then I thought again of your work, Dr Brown, and I was sure that this must be Lipid Proteins. And so I decided to track you down and consult the expert.”

Eventually I was able to get a word in. “Lipoid proteinosis. Just one question, Dr Singh, were these men all related?”

There was a puzzled pause at the end of the line while the static screamed at me in place of the excited voice of Salim Singh. “No,” he eventually admitted.

“You’re sure?”

“Well, when I spoke to the pharmacist he said that this outbreak of madness was from a small community near Lubombo village, he said, but no, they are not related.”

“Well, the problem with your theory is that lipoid proteinosis is an autosomal dominant condition. So one parent of a child would have to have the gene disorder and one in two of their children would then inherit it. With that pattern of inheritance, there would have to be a clear trend throughout the family. Also there are very few cases reported throughout the world. Probably only about 300 in total.”

“But I’ve already told the Minister of Health about you, that you’re the expert and you’ll help, and he wants you to come out to Lubombo. He’ll pay for your trip and everything.”

Lubombo... the name conjured up images from my childhood. Of the farm and the cattle and the veld and the wheeling blackbirds. Of cotton buds on their stalks and the heat sizzling off the ground and hot drops of convection rain and darkness, the absolute darkness of the country with the sprinkling of stars the only light.

It had been more than ten years since I had last been there, and suddenly I wanted to be back in that world. The world I had forgotten during the years of study and academic pursuit.

“Dr Singh, I’m not at all sure that you have the right diagnosis, but I’m willing to come out and have a look if they want me to.”

I looked up to check the time and saw out of the corner of my eye, a man walk in. He looked vaguely familiar and I realised that I knew him from the grainy black and white photo on the flyer. There seemed to be divided opinion about Gabriel Powell in the Astronomy Society whose meetings I had attended once or twice. Uniformly, it was acknowledged that he was very bright. Some called him arrogant and opinionated, others withdrawn and antisocial, yet others felt that he was a good bloke, just a bit different because he was a Brit.

Gabriel Powell was tall with a neat trimmed beard. At least, he looked tall that first day, though I was later to realise that he was not much taller than me, and it was just the way he carried himself that gave that appearance. The sandy hair with bits of grey made him look older than his 38 years. He walked with a loping gait, not a limp, but as though one leg was longer than the other. So that it carried him that little bit further on the one side. It gave him a lopsided gait, but one which had strength rather than clumsiness. In fact, he reminded me of a mountain climber, fit and tanned. The type who ate muesli for breakfast and drank tomato juice. So it came as a surprise when he ordered a double espresso and a muffin. Also surprising was the accent. Clear, well-modulated public school tones. Tweed jacket and jeans. Confident tone to the waitress.

“How are you today?”

“What would you choose – the carrot or the cinnamon?” with a small upturning of the mouth which immediately disarmed her. A voice that was

used to getting its way, but in a manner that made the other person feel that they had been given a rose.

Laden with cup and plate, he looked around for somewhere to sit. I buried my head in the magazine. With a wry smile he approached my table.

“Do you mind?”

“No, that's fine.”

Putting down the carefully balanced purchases, he extended his hand.

“Gabriel Powell.”

“Yes, I know who you are. I'm coming to listen to the talk.”

“Oh, a fan of my work, or just eclipses?”

“Perhaps neither. Just someone with a different view, coming to hear what you have to say.” A veil fell swiftly over his eyes. A momentary glimmer and then it was gone, and the polished friendly tone was back. His eyes up close were grey-green like a rock pool with sunlight patching spots across the centre. I was later to find that they changed colour from a sparkling clear green to the brooding dark grey of storm clouds. Today, though, I noticed the latent laughter and the hint of something behind that.

“A different view! Now what might that be?”

I wanted to say, an aesthetic one, as I thought of my childhood holidays in Swaziland with the pitch dark nights. Looking at the stars, at the haze of the Milky Way cloaking the sky and huddling the stars into its middle, a mother hen gently enclosing her chicks. Instead, I wiped cappuccino froth from my upper lip and said: “Oh, that there's more to eclipses than how they work.”

“Really, and you know how they work, do you?” A lazy smile again.

“I think so. I have the general idea.”

“Then I wonder why you are here. Er... I don't know your name.”

“Oh, Lena. Magdalena Brown.” He inclined his head in acknowledgement. “I guess people are here for many different reasons. I hope that you aren't surprised by them.”

He gulped the last of his coffee and said: “Very little surprises me anymore. I have to go and get ready for the talk. Sorry I can't carry on the conversation right now.” He pulled his haversack over his shoulder.

“Well, Magdalena Brown, I hope to see you again at the cocktail party afterwards, perhaps?” With a small smile, he walked away.

2.

I sat in the very back row of the round auditorium, the darkness layered by the faint blue of the planetarium sky. It felt like an ancient amphitheatre, intimate rows of seats, surrounding a sunken stage. Today the planetarium projector was lowered to make way for the lecturer. The space was full. We sat, waiting, a group of strangers flung together for a few minutes in time, bound by a shared interest. But, thinking of the crowd in the ticket queue, I wondered if any of them were thinking the same things, expecting the same things, hoping for the same things from this night.

We live in the world, passing most of our time in mundane existence; brushing teeth, leaning over to silence screeching early morning alarm clocks. And now and then we long for a different life. A lightning flash in a stormy sky, a leaf swaying in the wind, the promise of desire. It was that which drove me to the Planetarium that day. A search for crocodiles in city waters. There is a legend about the sun’s rising and setting, that each day it is eaten by a crocodile. As it dips close to the sea, it is swallowed by a crocodile waiting in the shallows and passed up again the next day. Why? Because the crocodile has power. Because the river will always fight with the sun.

The man next to me coughed and I snapped back to the auditorium just as Gabriel Powell walked through the row of circles and vaulted lightly over the railing into the centre of the stage.

“Good evening, ladies and gentleman. You are all here to find out more about the upcoming solar eclipse and it is exciting to see so much interest. My name is Gabriel Powell and I work in the Astronomy Department at the University of Cape Town, where my main research interest is in galaxy formation, evolution and cosmology. But tonight I hope to take you through some aspects of what eclipses are, why they happen and what to expect

while observing one.” The man next to me cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair till he was almost horizontal.

“At the end of the talk I will show you a simulation of an eclipse using the Planetarium’s star accelerator and then there will be some time for questions. So to start. What happens when an eclipse occurs.

“The Earth orbits the Sun in a plane called the ecliptic, and the Moon’s orbit around the Earth is inclined at five degrees to this plane. A solar eclipse occurs when the Moon moves exactly between the Earth and the Sun and literally blocks our view of the Sun. This can only happen because the Sun is 400 times the diameter of the moon, but it is also 400 times further from the Earth. Thus the two appear the same size in the sky.” He stopped and pulled out a thin laser pointer and clicked on a drawing, showing the size of the earth, the sun and the moon. “Everyone with me so far? An eclipse happens when the Moon is new and the orbit is oriented so that the Sun, Moon and Earth are all lined up. If the Moon is close enough to the Earth at this time, the Moon’s shadow can then reach the Earth, blocking direct sunlight for anyone inside the patch covered by shadow.”

I looked around at the audience. Everyone seemed to be listening intently. “Eclipses can be predicted using very accurate scientific methods based on the elliptical orbits of the Earth around the Sun and the Moon around the Earth,” he continued. “So it is possible to predict when eclipses will occur for the next ten decades. Our Mayan ancestors did this very well.”

I watched as he moved across the platform. There were illustrations, slides, finally pictures of eclipses. His voice was strong, confident, gentle. He explained things easily, seductively, encouraging interest, inviting a desire to understand this phenomenon which people rarely witnessed.

“Solar eclipses occur roughly every six months. They are actually not an uncommon event. They occur with boring regularity.” A wry smile seemed to cross his face for a moment as he looked in the direction of two women whispering to each other on my left. “Of course, many of these can only be seen from the sea, or the poles or uninhabited areas of land, and so go unnoticed. The eclipse that we will be seeing in a few weeks time will be a

total eclipse visible from the northern part of the country, parts of Botswana and Mozambique. Cape Town will see a partial eclipse of about 75%.”

There was a hum through the audience. A schoolboy in the front row said loudly to his friend. “Geez, all this and we won’t even see the whole thing.” A little ripple of laughter ran through the auditorium, but I was drawn to the two whispering women who seemed to have caught Gabriel’s attention. The older woman appeared tense. She wore a bright blue dress with a matching turban-like scarf. Her hands were clenched tightly in her lap and she stared fixedly ahead. Her companion was younger and more relaxed, laughing with the crowd at the schoolboy’s indignation.

“Yes, it is disappointing, I know,” Gabriel said, “but those who are really keen could travel to the north for the total experience. In fact, there are usually tour companies who arrange tours to witness these events. Often at great expense, I may add. For those staying in Cape Town, you can see the partial eclipse. Be careful to get your special protective glasses before you try to look at the Sun. They are available from the Observatory and many supermarkets and newspapers will be giving them away, I believe. This is absolutely essential. Looking directly at the Sun can blind you. And now, I think I’ll take questions before showing you the eclipse simulation.”

A schoolboy stuck his hand up immediately. “The Moon comes between the Earth and the Sun every month. So why don’t we have an eclipse every month?”

“Very good question. The reason is that the Moon’s orbit round the earth is tilted at 5 degrees, so the Moon usually passes above or below the Sun’s position in the sky and cannot block the Sun from our view. Only when the Moon’s tilted orbit crosses the Earth at the same time that the Sun is near this point, can an eclipse occur. This happens roughly twice a year.”

Another hand was raised and a tall man in the back row near me stood up. He had thin fingers and hair greying at the temples, his hand moved like a conductor waving his baton but, before he could speak, Gabriel said: “Ah, Philip, how good of you to come and listen to my little talk. Hardly worthy of spending your time on. Ladies and gentlemen, Philip Wiley, my

colleague. I'm sure he would be better off helping me answer your questions than asking me one himself." Philip Wiley, hand still poised in mid-air, seemed to have a low-grade smile fixed to his lips. From where I sat it looked a bit like a sneer.

"Thank you Gabriel, but I do have a question for you. In the spirit of fostering public interest in Astronomy, why don't you tell us a bit about your research. You mentioned galaxy formation and evolution."

The veil that I had seen cloud Gabriel's eyes in the coffee shop was there again for a split second. Then, like before, it disappeared and he spoke lightly. "I'm not sure that this is the right forum. It would take too long to set the scene and explain the background. Suffice it to say that, I am studying different types of galaxies. Each galaxy is unique in its appearance and, by understanding why galaxies have a particular shape, we can work out their past."

Philip Wiley was still standing, staring at Gabriel. The blue dressed woman was whispering to her friend again. "Spirals have rested undisturbed in space for many millions, possibly trillions of years. Elliptical galaxies have a more violent history, crashing into other galaxies and forming mergers, and irregular galaxies are the most interesting. They have been disturbed in some way in the recent past. In some instances they have been torn apart, allowing us to look inside them in a way that would usually not be possible. And now I see glazed expressions and I think that I should stop with this line of exploration and get back to eclipses. Are there any other questions?"

An array of varied questions followed: What did eclipses look like, what were Bailey's beads, was the foil from a tea packet enough for eye protection? Then, with a little shimmer of blue, the woman in the turban stood up. She seemed to pull herself up to her full height though she still looked small as she wound her hands together fingers over palm.

"You've not told us anything about the effect eclipses have on the world. About how we in Africa should be preparing for the disasters to follow. The aspects in the sky at this time and the potentially powerful solar eclipse over

Southern Africa mean massive havoc.” Her voice rose in confidence as she got into her stride, but Gabriel interrupted with a raising of his hand.

“Excuse me, Miss... er...”

“Romaine Dukes from the Astrological Society.”

“Of course you are.” His voice took on a low drawl which sounded achingly polite, like a silent tiger crouching for the kill. “Today’s lecture is only about science, not about magic and superstition.”

Romaine Dukes persisted: “I am talking about Science. Look at the Solar Eclipse and Grand Cross of 1999, for example. Within days of its passing over the west coast of Australia a severe cyclone hit the coast near where the eclipse passed overhead and army troops began assembling for a peacekeeping role in the Indonesian province of Timor. This is just some of the fall-out Indonesia is experiencing after the 1998 eclipse which passed over Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei. After that the Malaysian political scene was thrown into turmoil, when the leader jailed his right-hand man on trumped up charges and Indonesia experienced the worst civil unrest since the riots which brought Suharto’s resignation.”

Gabriel was laughing now. “And you think that these political events are related to the eclipse. Natural phenomena like earthquakes, I will buy. Gravitational change could cause that, but riots and overthrowing rulers! No, Ms Dukes. This sounds like the old priests who predicted – through Science, may I add – that an eclipse would happen and then, when it did, told their flocks that the gods were angry and made them promise all sorts of things to them before miraculously ‘lifting’ the shadow from the Sun.”

I saw Romaine Dukes’ lip tremble and her palm wringing was even more feverish. I found myself on my feet, jumping to her rescue. “I think that eclipses are things of beauty to behold. They induce a sense of awe at the majesty of the universe which we usually take for granted.” He turned to me, trying to pinpoint the voice in the darkened auditorium. “I do believe that those who see a special significance in eclipses are drawn to greater heights – poetry, creativity, spirituality, one that inspires poets, artists, musicians,” I continued.

“And magicians and quacks.”

“You forget that the whole of Greek culture was founded on the belief that Mercury and Venus were gods. There is an entire literary pantheon based on that. Not to mention the contribution of mythology to the psyche of the times and, in turn, of ours.”

“Touché, you have me on that one. However, we have evolved since then in our understanding of the world and natural phenomena. Yet half the world seems to believe that the day you were born has the biggest influence on your personality. I wonder how they compensate for that in this modern age of planned deliveries and elective caesareans. We're no further along than the fools who banned Copernicus for saying that the world was not flat.”

“And what do you think the major influence on personality is?”

“Genetics and life events.”

3.

And so it began. My encounter with the Sun. With flames that flicker hot and then burn with coldness. A collapsed star burns bright around the outside of a cold heart. A heart of ashes. Daylight peeling through the bushes. In the midst of the fire, a hope arises. Is this in the past or is it yet to come?

Is there ever really a past, or only a present with memories clouded by perception? You walked away with a slice of my memories between your teeth.

So you are a new person now. Someone I do not know, perhaps someone I never knew. Is this your escape from your demons, the demons you profess to have, who drain you? It would be so easy to let go. Your life is yours to play with, misuse or destroy. I cannot care any longer how you do it, or you will destroy mine. So there is a learning to do. A learning to walk alone, to sink into myself and not into you.

4.

In anticipation of the night, my thoughts drifted back to childhood. There were only oil lamps at Grandpa's house. This was a time when the rest of the world was electrically lit. They cooked on a wood stove, stoked with logs to a burning heat. The kitchen was always hot and steamy, condensation on the windows competing with the dry red-dust heat outside. The sun set early, even in summer. The long languid Cape Town summer evenings were replaced by hot, sticky dark nights with the orange glow of oil lamps and the smell of paraffin.

Crouched reading over a lamp, I would eventually give up, go to bed, lie down on the sheets and listen for the buzzing of the mosquitoes. Some nights I would walk outside. There were no street lights and the nights were black. The stars were clear in that country dark and I stared upwards at their white glow and the milky coalescence in the sky, like a pattern of shadows through tree leaves. Even then I liked the stars. They reminded me of points on a paint-by-numbers set. The one with the black velvet background. I didn't know the constellations then, didn't know what a star was, what caused it to give off light and what made it different from a planet. But they made me feel more secure in the dark.

Some nights we all lay in bed and my cousins told ghost stories. Was that what sparked my interest in the myths of Africa? Or was it my Grandpa's stories which he told us while sitting in the long, narrow lounge on the couches with cushions that did not quite fit?

5.

The crowd funnelled out of the circular room amidst a low rumble of conversation, a few scrabbling in bags for keys and others heading for the tables with drinks. The lecture room opened out into a narrow passage with pictures of stars and galaxies along its walls. Normally I would stop to look at some of these, transported to another world. Now, however, I tried to move quickly towards the exit, but was trapped by the motion of the mass. The simulated eclipse, which was the highlight of the evening had passed

me by, so flustered was I by this unusual encounter. I usually hung around in the background unnoticed, certainly not leaping to the defence of strangers and arguing with people I had barely met.

A hand at my elbow propelled me in the direction of the drinks table.

“What shall I get you to drink? Wait, let me guess. White wine with a dash of soda?”

“Actually, I was just leaving.” Mortified, I looked into grey-green eyes flashing with danger.

“After cutting out the heart of my scientific training in public, the least you can do is have a drink with me.” Gabriel poured two glasses and handed one to me. He held them in one hand as he poured, each glass with its round bulb dipping at an angle, threatening to spill the pale liquid onto my feet or his, while their thin stems crossed in casual intimacy. Looking back, I wonder if that was the moment when I should have stepped back. But he was engaging, attractive in a strange way and there was a feeling of something more, something hidden, something that needed to be discovered. I was intrigued by this man who seemed on one hand to be arrogant and condescending, yet also sensitive and surprisingly gracious outside of his field and comfort zone. Perhaps that was when I should have remembered Samuel. Samuel, my first great love and my first great loss. Samuel who had attracted me with his mystery and his secrets.

So I took the glass, cold with the Museum sponsored wine and warm from the hold of Gabriel’s hand on its rump. There seemed to be a queue of people forming around us. Everyone had a question to ask, or a point to make, or an argument to advance. After all this was about the universe and the far reaches of life. And how could that be just about Science? How could that not be about the essence of being, and purpose and the mystery of death?

In a way it was like my work. The reduction of the body to its smallest components, its chromosomes. Seeing the bars of the body, the bars that make up every cell in the body, seems for some to be the explanation of everything we are. But seeing the cross banded X-shaped arms, some long and thin, some with fat arms crossing over stocky legs, this does not explain

the way the mind jumps from one thought to another, the way the heart beats faster at the touch of someone's hand, or the way a breeze through the trees on a summer morning can sway the grass and sweep a feeling of ecstatic peace through the body.

I stood back and watched and listened as Gabriel explained, argued, laughed and cajoled. There was no sign of his colleague nor of Ms Dukes. Finally, there seemed to be a gap in the stream of people clamouring to speak to him.

"Let's get out of here before the next round of questions starts." His hand nuzzled against my elbow.

"What?"

"I'm expected at a party. A small group of friends. Come with me."

"That's crazy. I hardly know you."

"And you have a mother who tells you not to talk to strangers. I assure you that I'm not an axe murderer or a closet philanderer. You do know who I am and you do know where to find me at the university, so you are quite safe."

"Well, I had plans for this evening," I muttered unconvincingly.

Gabriel raised his eyebrows. "I just thought that you might be interested in meeting some of these people. They're a small group of mostly amateur astronomers and other hangers-on. Two or three of us have been talking about a trip to witness the next total eclipse."

I was immediately tempted. "What about my car?" I said, lamely dragging out the last excuse that I could come up with.

"Well, the party is just up the road in Tamboerskloof. Your car will be quite safe in the parking lot, and I could drop you back here. Well before midnight, I promise."

As we walked out into the cool, scented air little tongues of anxiety flicked at me. Why was it that I was going with this man to a party full of strangers? Never one to start conversations easily this was certainly not my idea of entertainment. But I was intrigued by Gabriel, by the idea of meeting his friends and talking to people who had a shared interest in astronomy. He

opened the door of a bottle green Honda hatchback for me, and walked round to slide into the driver's seat. The drive could not have been more than ten minutes, but we seemed to cover a lot of ground in the time.

"So, you'd better tell me a few things about yourself, so that it doesn't look like I've brought a complete stranger to the party with me."

I wanted to say, but you have. Instead I said: "What do you want to know?"

"Well, for now, how about what you do."

"I'm a geneticist." In the dark interior of the car, I felt him turn to me for a moment and I imagined a slight raising of the eyebrow, though I couldn't really see. I realised that I had picked up on this mannerism of his from the few minutes of watching him interact with the people at the lecture.

"That's interesting. And unexpected. So where does the interest in astronomy come from?"

"I've always been interested in the stars. Somehow, when I was a kid, I got caught up with looking at the sky. During the day it was the clouds, drifting by and changing shape. And at night it was the stars. I always loved it when I could be in the country where the sky is very clear."

I stopped, embarrassed that I'd said so much, but Gabriel didn't comment. Instead, he went on lightly. "And the genetics. What do you do exactly?"

"I work at the Medical School, partly seeing families with genetic disorders and partly doing research. I'm just about to go off for a few weeks to rural Swaziland, looking at a population of people who've suddenly developed an outbreak of psychosis."

"You mean they've all gone mad?"

"Well, that's not quite how I'd put it, but yes, about fifty people in a small community there suddenly started behaving strangely."

"So wouldn't they need a psychiatrist, not a geneticist?"

Before I could answer we pulled up beside a narrow Victorian semi. It was bordered by a disorderly hedge and a white wooden gate leading to a small paved path onto which spilled luxuriant purple bougainvillea. There

was a big bay window next to the front door and lights were shining through the thin voile curtain.

“So here we are,” Gabriel said. “The people who live here are Macy and George. And you’ll meet my good friend, Mouse. He’s an astronomical photographer. Don’t worry, I really did bring you along because I thought you might be interested in some of this crowd,” he smiled, “and, of course, they may be interested in you.”

The bougainvillea gave off its characteristic fragrance, which reminded me of the jacaranda smell of my childhood. The front door was open behind a security gate and the small hallway opened up into a large open plan room. The smell of cooking fish wafted through the air. Almost immediately a large woman with curly black hair and a friendly round face unlocked the gate.

“Ah, Gabriel, you made it. How did the talk go?” She stopped as she saw me standing slightly behind him.

“Lena, this is Macy. She’s a colleague of mine in the Department. Macy – Lena. We met at the lecture and I couldn’t resist bringing her along after what she did to me.”

I wondered if Gabriel often brought unexpected women along with him to parties, but before I could follow this line of thought, I was swept into the large room by Macy’s exuberant voice.

“Well, you’re just in time. I was grilling some tuna and there’s a great big salad that Angie brought.” The house was old and its wooden floors creaked under foot, but the interior had been converted into a modern open-plan design. There was a large sitting area with embossed cream couches and, at the far end, a granite kitchen slab with a hob set in the middle of it. A tall man was turning a fish over in the pan. Macy bustled over and put her arm around his waist, so that I knew this was her husband, George. The remainder of the gathering consisted of two young women with spunky spiked short hair, a middle-aged spectacled man poring over what appeared to be a document, a middle-aged couple who were pouring drinks and a large man with red hair, who came over to Gabriel as soon as we entered.

“Lena, my good friend, Mouse.” Mouse, I found out later, was a Scot who had come to South Africa on holiday a few years ago and had stayed. A trace of an accent remained as he said: “Very pleased to meet you, Lena.” and took my hand in a great paw-like grip.

The two spiky haired women, I discovered, were journalists and the middle aged couple were members of the amateur astronomical society and the spectacled man was a colleague of Gabriel’s.

“So how did the talk go, old chap? Is Cape Town geared up for the eclipse?” Cliff, the man from the astronomical society asked.

“And did you remember to mention that we’d be having public viewings at the Observatory? ”

“I think Cape Town’s a bit disappointed that it won’t be a total eclipse,” Gabriel said, “and some are really disappointed that I didn’t hold with the idea of eclipses and world catastrophe.”

“Well, you should have expected that,” one of the journalists said.

“Never mind,” said Mouse in his deep calm voice, “we can look at our plans to see the total eclipse. I’ve brought the map along and we need to decide on our location quite soon.”

“Eat first,” waved Macy, “before you get caught up for the rest of the evening with plans.”

The tuna was perfectly seared, crisp on the outside and rare on the inside, and the salad was laden with spring onions, avocado and ripe baby tomatoes and feta cheese, between the frilled lettuce and rocket leaves. Two bottles of chilled wine were plonked on the table and people pulled up tall bar stools and sat around, helping themselves to the simple but delicious meal. I was sitting with Macy on one side of me and Gabriel on the other. Turning to her, I whispered: “This is a wonderful meal Macy, and thank you so much for having me.”

She smiled. “Yes, you didn’t get round to telling me how you and Gabriel know each other, and what was that he said about something you’d done to him at the lecture.”

Gabriel topped up my glass with white wine, but didn’t add any to his own.

“Ah, yes. Lena and I met just before the lecture and first she challenged me about being too scientific and then she took the side of a Ms Romaine Dukes from the Astrological Society. In public too.”

“No doubt that’s why you brought her here, then,” said Mouse. “Because you were totally humiliated. Don’t worry about him, Lena, you’ll get used to when to take him seriously and when not to.”

“You’re used to that, are you Mouse?” Gabriel laughed.

“Well, after fourteen years, I would hope so.”

“So, Lena, I’m intrigued. I’m trying to work out where you fit in. Is it on the astrological side? What do you do?” asked one of the spiky haired journalists.

“Well, actually, I’m a geneticist. Nothing to do with astronomy or astrology. I’m just interested in the aesthetics of the universe.”

“And you’re planning on joining the expedition to see the eclipse in September?”

I looked at Gabriel in confusion. “I told you I thought you might be interested in some of what we were going to be discussing tonight. Cara and Angie do a lot of reporting on astronomical issues, Macy and George are both members of Sirius and have been on a few eclipse tours in different parts of the world, Cliff is a meteorologist and on one of his trips to the Antarctic saw the Northern lights and was so captivated that he now wants the full Monty, and Tony works with me in my research on irregular galaxies. Mouse is an astronomical photographer. He sets up cameras in isolated places at the dead of night and leaves them for hours on time exposures so that they can take split second interval pictures of stars.”

“Och, Gabriel, I didn’t know you understood,” Mouse laughed.

“So you’re all planning to go and see the next total solar eclipse?” I asked.

“Well, I’m not sure that we’ll all go, but it’s worth talking about and seeing what’s feasible. Also all the input helps each person in their own field, even if they don’t get to the final stage of the journey.”

And I wonder why you have asked me here, then, I thought. I had never contemplated an eclipse tour and I had nothing to contribute scientifically or experientially.

The rest of the evening was taken up with talk on climate conditions, the place where the eclipse was observable for the longest duration, practicalities of destinations, and then it was over and I was hugging Macy goodbye and climbing into the comfortable seat of the Honda again.

The car park of the Planetarium was deserted at this time of night and my car was the only one there. The drive home had seemed much faster than going there. Gabriel started asking me about my work but, avoiding an idiot who had shot a red robot and a group of happily tipsy students near Michaelis campus, took away his concentration and, before I knew it, the Honda was pulling up next to mine. The dome of the Planetarium glowed blue from the lights of the restaurant across the road. The moon was almost full and it crept into the front seats of the car beside us as the engine slowed to silence. The interior of the car seemed suddenly too small and intimate, Gabriel's hand on the gear lever beside me too close, and his breath misting the window almost in the same air space that I was inhaling.

"So, nearly full moon and Betelgeuse just above us even here with the lights of the city," he smiled.

"Maybe it isn't really there." I said.

He raised his jaw enquiringly.

"How many light years did it take for that light to reach us? Maybe the star has already burned out."

"I knew there was a scientist in you somewhere, despite your efforts at denial."

"Not at all. It's not about science. It's about truth. What is truth, if what I see in the sky clear as night, doesn't actually exist anymore? So don't think you know me," I said.

"Lena, I think I'd like to know you more. I haven't had such a stimulating conversation for more years than I can remember. Nor met someone as contradictory as you either. I'd like to know more about your job as well. It sounds fascinating."

“Well, I wouldn’t mind seeing your department and your telescopes,” I said.

“If you want to see telescopes you really need to come to Sutherland.”

“Do you go there?”

“Yes, from time to time. In fact, I’ll probably be going in the next month or two to check some data. But you could come and watch the partial eclipse from the Observatory telescope. They’ll have it open to the public with a short lecture beforehand and explanation as it approaches 75%. The Honours students will be recording eclipse data from their own telescope. Perhaps you’d find that interesting?”

“I think I would, Thank you. But I’m off to Swaziland in a few days time.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“It depends how the work goes, but I think two or three weeks.”

“Well, you’ll be back just in time then. Remember this whole month is an Astronomy awareness month, culminating in the eclipse at the end.”

“So, I’ll look forward to seeing it from the Observatory then,” I smiled.

“One condition. You tell me about your job and take me to see what you do. And we have dinner after the eclipse watching.”

“Sorry, that’s two conditions there.”

“Not if you tell me about your work over dinner. We can hardly do it in a deserted car park at midnight in Cape Town city centre. Not really safe, is it?”

“Gabriel, I’m not really up for...” He raised his hand to my lips, but stopped before touching them.

“Lena, I’ve been in Cape Town for three years. I’ve met lots of nice people, I love my research, I have a great flat overlooking the sea, but I do miss my home in Bristol and my family, and it’s never really the same being a foreigner. So when I find someone interesting, someone who makes me think, someone whom I can’t put into a box – Right wing, Power monger, Religious freak, Scientist, *etc.* – that makes me live in a different dimension for a few minutes. That’s all. No ulterior motive. No games.”

CHAPTER 2.

1.

The plane scudded down onto the tarmac and the propellers slowly ground to a halt as it taxied along the runway. It took only a few minutes for the air hostess to disengage the short staircase and unfold it onto the ground. The sixteen passengers descended gingerly and the heat hit like a bomb explosion. The tar felt hot through my thin sandals. The airport building was white washed with small glass windows and a guard tiredly waved people along the path to the entrance.

The luggage arrived and was piled on the floor. There was no roundabout. Quickly people took their suitcases and disappeared through the customs and passport control which consisted of a desk manned by two men. And then I was alone in the small lobby leading to the outside. There was no Arrivals hall as such.

Outside there was a small veranda where five or six people were waiting, leaning against the wall to get some shade. No-one had any name cards. I looked around, wondering how I would know who was picking me up from the hospital. No-one approached me. I watched an old man with a long white beard wandering across from the parking lot. He might look like a Father Christmas, but he was too thin and too old. His face was weather beaten and his clothes functional – khaki shorts and a khaki shirt. The bandy legs were surprisingly strong and the sandaled feet looked strong too. Everyone else seemed to have disappeared, except for two airport officials drinking cokes from cans on the veranda. Mr Long Beard came up to me.

“Y’ Dr Brown, then?” The raspy voice and Cockney accent surprised me, as I nodded.

“I’m Ulysses Crane. I be driving you over to the hospital. Been driving for ’em for twenty years,” he added as he saw my surprise. “Know the place like the back of me hand.” He gave a toothy grin which was strangely reassuring.

The drive took about 45 minutes and I had time to look at the place where I would be spending the next few weeks. The roads were tarred but there were no pavements. Red sandy mounds provided walking areas for people and cattle along the side of the roads. We passed alongside several villages with round white washed rondavels with peaked straw roofs. Scrawny goats nibbled on dried roots and husks of grass. But this was really cattle country.

“So, this your first time here?” Ulysses Crane asked.

“Actually no, Mr Crane, my grandfather used to farm cattle here. I came here often as a child, but I haven’t been for a long time now.”

“Call me Ulysses. Everyone does. Though they don’t always say it right.” He cackled loudly. “Brown was it? Where was your gran’pa’s farm?”

“It was up in the north.” Suddenly tears stung the back of my throat as I thought back to those carefree childhood days. I didn’t want to talk about them now. “And you, Ulysses, have you always been at the hospital?”

He cackled again. “Like everyone else around, I done lots of things. Tried me hand at cattle, but I ain’t got the feel for it. Had a small shopping business for a while. Found I weren’t no businessman neither. Then I went into gold. There’s gold hidden round these parts, y’know. Me and some mates went excavating. Found a bit, but not enough to last, and we never found the main vein.”

“And so you started driving for the hospital?” I asked.

“Do all kinds of things for them, little miss. Met up with old Dr Hindley when me wife died in childbirth.” His eyes clouded over for a second. “Beautiful lass she was. Local. Brown as a berry. Hips to drown in. But she couldn’t birth our child. Died in me arms with the blood of the baby all around her. Dr Hindley helped me through. Was a very bad time. Then he gave me a job, and I been there ever since.”

“The child?”

“Died too. Choked in its own blood.”

The heat from the road steamed up through the windows and a speckling of red dust seemed to have settled on Ulysses khaki shoulder. We drove in silence for a while. The tar had petered out and we were now

driving on hard gravel, which made the cloying dust cloud even more suffocating. The open *veld* on the sides of the road was dotted with thorn trees. Black shrikes slid into the air as we passed, shrieking loudly.

“So, Miss Doctor, we be in the heart of the *bushveld* now. Hospital’s about ten minutes away.”

“My name is Lena,” I said.

He smiled his toothy smile. “Lena. Pretty name. Young enough to be my daughter, you are. She was a girl, you know. Folks around here prefer boys, but me, I always fancied a girl. When I saw her lying there so perfect, pale as a sheet with the blood drained from her, a name sprang to mind. I called her Maddie. Short for Madeleine, after me grandmam.”

My heart caught in my throat for a moment. Magdalena, my name. And Madeleine, the name of his dead child. What a coincidence. I searched for something to say.

“Do you know why I’m here, Ulysses?”

“I hear you’s coming to sort out this illness that’s taking our young men.”

“What do you know about the illness, then?”

“I’ve seen illness, Lena, lots and lots of ’em. Black water fever took me Dad. The malaria, y’know. First he had the fevers, shivering and shaking though it were the heart of winter. The quinine brought the fever down, but then his water went black. Black as pitch it were in the bottom of that white toilet bowl, I’ll never forget. And bilharzia, lots of them little buggers crawling into the bladder while you swim and chewing away from the inside. But this...” He shook his head from side to side and the old felt hat nodded with him. “Folks round here says it’s *ukuthakatha*.”

I looked at him blankly.

“Witchcraft,” he cackled.

“Surely you don’t believe that?” I asked.

“As I say, I seen illness, but this here’s something different.”

“What’d you mean?”

“Well the first time it happened, were a call went out to the police and the hospital at the same time. I drove Dr Spitse down there to the village.

There was a low keening as we got near and we could see a crowd outside one of the houses. The boy was kneeling outside a house on his road, head down and fists up next to his ears. He got to his feet as we drove near and said his grandmother had sent him to the house to bring back the people inside as dead bodies.

“I didn’t go in that hut, but there was policemen there who seen lots of bad stuff, and they came out of there retching. Said there was blood everywhere, all over the walls, even in the cooking pots.”

“Come now, Ulysses, some boy kills some people. Says someone told him to, and you say this is witchcraft.”

“Thing was, Lena, when he got up and turned around, his whole body was covered in blisters, like bubbles and in his mouth there were bloody crusts like thick red orange peel. Peeling off his tongue as he spoke.” He paused and swallowed hard, remembering. “I seen that boy the day before and his skin was smooth as a guinea fowl.”

2.

It was a restless night. The small room with the pink quilted bed was comfortable enough and it was so hot that the lack of any form of mat or carpet on the floor was a relief rather than a liability. The tap squeaked when it opened, and loudened to a shrill screech as it opened wider to let the cool water out into the wide porcelain basin. However, it was neither this nor the unfamiliar surroundings that disturbed me and not even the humid cloying air or the buzz of the mosquitoes round the light bulb. I woke in the night to the image of the boy that Ulysses had described. A boy on his knees, covered in the blood of a family he had just killed, eyes yellowed and mouth contorted in agony as though he were being tortured by demons which were sending him out of his mind. The next time I woke it was with the remnants of a vision of a baby stillborn and pale, and her mother in a pool of blood soaking her white cotton nightdress and pooling around her dark thighs. Ulysses’ stories had gotten to me. I barely remembered the people whom he had introduced me to – the hospital

superintendent, a tall lanky man with a suit and tie despite the heat, the housekeeper who showed me to my room in the doctors' quarters and the medical officer who ran the hospital.

The night falls quickly in the bush, no twilight, as though the day has finished its business and finds no point in lingering. The shadows coalesce to a darkness that is luminous and a silence that is heavy. The dome of the sky seems to hang in this hammock slung across the world like a mother with her baby tied to her back. Gradually the night emerges. A kingdom of croaking frogs, the trickle of a stream magnified in the silence, and the slow brightness of the stars lighting up the sky. I grew used to this over the next few weeks, but that first night, the darkness, unpenetrated by the city lights I was used to, and the strange sounds of insects and unfamiliar animal calls, unsettled me.

After the second dream, I got up, unlocked the door and stepped out onto the cement stoep in my bare feet, wondering what I had let myself in for. I looked up at the sky, searching out Orion's belt. Seeing it made me feel better. My father told me when I was a little girl and we were away from home, that I could always look up at the sky and find Orion's belt. And wherever in the world I was, it was the same belt I could see from my home, so it could not be too foreign or too far away.

My father was a doctor, steeped in the doctrine of science. He read medical journals for relaxation and studied patients' records in his spare time, so that he could optimise their management. Influenced by this, I registered for a degree in Medicine and then specialised in Genetics. Frequently though, I found my feet drifting towards the Greek mythology section of Jagger library. Poring through the books of ancient heroes, strange journeys, half human creatures – Cyclopes and Minotaurs, magic sirens luring sailors to their doom, I felt at home. This world was not a world of explanations, of reducing everything to DNA or dissecting cockroaches down to their smallest muscles, and then figuring out how they fitted to each bone and joint. This was a world of mystery and romance. And yet it felt real at some level, familiar. The ranging stories, Theseus

unwinding his thread through the maze, left a frisson of unknown – fear, excitement, sweat and uncertainty blending into one.

My mind wandered back to memories of childhood.

3.

I remembered listening to Grandpa's colourful tales which kept us city children spellbound. But the best part was the stories I discovered for myself.

That summer I was ten years old, young for memories. Yet they fluttered round me as we climbed the last hill, drove down the road of jacarandas and drew up before the house with the polished red stoep. He was sitting in the same place, my grandfather, in the slatted deck chair. One leg was thrown out in front of him, the other curled up beneath the chair. He eased himself to his feet, a slow smile breaking across his face as he saw the car. I jumped out, ran up the two squat steps and was caught and flung up in his arms.

"Lena, you are growing tall. You look more and more like your grandmother each time I see you." He ran a hand over my short dark hair. As he put me down to clasp my father to him, there seemed to be a stronger urgency in his embrace. I ran into the house, feeling it settle over me. The routine of the city classroom gave way to the old fashioned warmth of the farmhouse. The heavy, dark sideboard in the corner of the dining-room stood on its claw-feet. I twisted the old brass handle and reached inside for a glass. I breathed in the rough soap smell of the cupboard. Inside was a bread loaf, fresh and crumbly, smelling of hand-milled flour. The kitchen sweated from the heat of the wood stove and the water from the tap was warm. But where was Mtute?

When I met Mtute four years before, he saved my life. I was being chased by a headless chicken. Solomon, his brother, was slaughtering a chicken for dinner. I don't know why he picked on me but he sent the headless body of the chicken running in my direction. Blood spouted from where its head should have been. A few metres away the head, in Solomon's

grasp, shrilled madly and fixed its rolling eyes on me as he stood laughing. Into this scene, Mtute came running. After throwing a brown mealie bag over the flailing chicken, he pulled me away from the spot where I stood rooted with fear, into the kitchen. He then ran off to deal Solomon a hard blow to the chin. I dreamt in the next few weeks of Mtute rescuing me again and again.

I wandered from room to room and finally went outside. I found Mtute sitting in the branches of the old red-lantern tree, a coating of red dust on his skin and clothes as always. But this time, as I looked at his face, there also seemed to be a layer of grey dust over his soul. He was two years older than me but he looked like an old man.

"Are you not happy to see me, Mtute?" I poked at the line of ants winding across the path.

"I am happy to see you, Lena. But these are very bad times."

"I heard that there's a drought. But it will pass. My uncle says they always do."

"By then it may be too late," he sighed. "Already my father's field has changed colour. The potatoes have rotted in the ground and their skins have wrinkled to black. The red fire of the earth is covered over by the black ash of funerals. See," he pointed to the ground, "the dust is grey. My sister had a child two months ago. The baby died last week. They said her milk was too weak to feed him, because the earth was too weak to feed her."

I wriggled as the ants crawled over my arms, their little feet itching and burning.

"Even your grandfather with his big farm has lost half his mealie crop. Thirty of his cattle have died."

"So that's why Grandpa was so sad," I thought.

"My mother says it will end soon," he said.

"How does your mother know?" I asked.

"It is one of her stories. A story of the man the earth and the skies listen to. She says she has seen him with her own eyes. She says this is the time when he will come again."

I had heard many of Sipiwe's stories. Every holiday when we came to the farm, I would visit her. I sat open mouthed in wonder at the colourful way in which she spoke and often dreamt about her exciting adventures.

"What happened when she saw the man?" I asked Mtute.

"It's all superstition. But you can come tomorrow and hear it yourself. Me, I watch the weather patterns."

A caterpillar crawled up onto a leaf of the banana tree. It rasped the centre for the vein. The leaf was brittle and the vein was dry. The caterpillar fell to the ground on strips of crumbling green. It lay inert. A field mouse raised its head, sniffed the worm and staggered slowly off.

The dinner that night was hearty. After the *braaied* meat and the mealie bread which Grandpa had made himself, my cousins sat outside on the red *stoep* and told stories while the grown-ups talked inside by the light of the paraffin lamps. My baby sister slept blissfully in her cot. It was late when I went inside. As I passed Grandpa's room I saw him sitting on his bed holding a piece of paper. His head was bowed. Later I went to see what it was. Beside his bed was a faded photograph of my grandmother, and with it a small hand-carved wooden cross.

Mtute's mother's hut smelled of beef cooked over open fires, of fat drippings in the rush mats, of pot bread and wood smoke. Sipiwe sat on the mud floor, her legs drawn up under her. She made me sit on the zebra-hide drum.

"You are growing up, Lena, but you are too tall and skinny. All the growing is in your bones and none to fill your flesh with softness. That is not good." She filled a bowl with *mbidwo* cakes and *nqushe* and poured a cup of strong marula juice. I knew I would not be allowed to speak until I had eaten to bursting point.

"Mtute says the drought is bad. I heard Sibongile lost her child. And the rain will not come."

"It will be over soon." She smiled.

"How do you know?" I asked.

“He will save the land.” She smiled again. “It was ten years ago in this month when we had a drought like this. You were two months old. I remember because it was the time your grandmother died. She was sad that she had not seen you. Mtute was two years old and he was sick, like Sibongile’s child. I thought I would lose him. Every day I sat in the hot sun and tried to keep him cool. There was little water in the river, and only the deep part near the litchi tree held some smell of wetness.

“One night I went down to the river alone. I could feel the heaviness of the tears inside me. I walked along the track of the empty river. The stones, worn smooth by water, were hard and sharp now from the wind and sun. I reached the litchi tree which sometimes was covered up to its top leaves by the water when it was full. Now there was only a small pool. As I stooped to fill my hand, the moon shifted. The track lit up and the river turned to red. In that brilliant light, half-bent, half-blind, I saw him walk across the *veld*. He was tall and strong. He swung his arms with the briskness of his walk. The stars came down from the skies and clung to his clothes. He plucked them from him and flung them to the ground. Some landed on the river bed.

“The next day it rained. I knew who he was. He comes to save the land when the rain clings tightly to the sky. He has the feel of the earth in his blood and can talk to it as a brother. He was the man whom the earth and sky obeyed, and he had come to make peace between them.”

Mtute laughed, saying that she had been drinking too much marula juice. Sibongile believed everything her mother said without question. I knew that in a drought the marula fruit rotted and did not ferment and so could not be brewed. We could not resolve this issue, the three of us, and so we planned to visit the river ourselves.

It was easy for me to leave my room. We slept early in those days for, when the sun set, the old oil lamps brought heat and mosquitoes and could not be endured for long.

They were waiting at the river near the litchi tree. Sibongile was tense and excited. Mtute chewed on a piece of grass. The air was cool and the *veld* was very still. Even the crickets were quiet and the bullfrogs were

asleep. The moon swayed through the few wisps of cloud. We sat there for an hour, growing sleepier and sleepier. Then Sibongile pinched my arm. The moon had moved to light up the patch of water left in the river. It lit up the soil in the riverbed turning it a dull, gleaming red.

On the other bank I saw my grandfather walking to the ford. He passed through a patch of glow-worms hovering near the stagnant water. They clung to his clothes like tiny lamps and he brushed them away with his hands. Some fell to the ground in little sparkles, and some fell into the track of the river. I saw what Sipiwe had seen ten years ago. But I did not think his stride was strong or that his walk was brisk. He was stooped and slow and I fancied that, between brushing away the glow-worms, he also wiped his eyes. They did not see him, as I did, walk to the grave of my grandmother. In his hand he carried a small wooden cross. Sibongile and Mtute turned to go but I stayed and watched him. He fell to his knees, his head upon his chest.

The next day it rained.

Grandpa told us his version of this story. He told it as a ghost story. How he'd been walking across the fields on the farm late one night when he saw a patch of glowing light. "Do you believe in ghosts?" He thought the patch of light followed him. As he got close to the lights of the farmhouse it disappeared. He didn't believe in ghosts but this was one of those inexplicables, Something the mind did not believe, but the head could not explain. Something the heart retained a feeling about, a sense of something felt and known but not thought and understood. Of course, we sat down and talked about the patch of light, and concluded that this was a patch of glow-worms that Grandpa had seen. There were insects, fireflies, unknowns in that part of the *veld*, so it was an easy explanation to tack on to. We even used the climatic conditions to lend weight to the reasoning. It was the rainy season – hot summer rain which condensed to steaming sumps of mud, which would attract these insects. It all fitted neatly. Our lives slotted together like a puzzle with all the pieces exactly the right shape. Explained, rationalised, it could be deleted from that bag of disquieting feelings that sat

uncomfortably without understanding. In my mind the science and the glow-worms lay side by side and I let them fight each other. But, strangely, they laid their weapons aside, embraced and both made sense. The one explained the reality, Grandpa striding through a patch of glow-worms; the other the feeling.

4.

Five o'clock came with a cock's crow and a faint gleam of pink light. I woke to my first day in Lubombo with sleep swirled thoughts of madness and loss and starry skies and, on the edge of these memories, a picture of Gabriel smiling at me with clear green eyes and passing me a glass of wine. I shook my head to focus on the day ahead. Though I had not slept much, my mind felt ready to kick into action. I showered, ignoring the gecko watching from the wall, and then set about arranging my notes into files and packing my medical bag with the equipment I might need. When Dr Marco knocked on the door to take me to breakfast and then to the clinic, I was ready.

Breakfast was in a spacious airy room which was mainly empty. A large pot filled with cooked oats porridge stood next to a smaller pot with a thin white liquid which I was told was *mageau*, a type of sour milk. Large quantities of both were dished into my bowl by the woman ladling behind the counter. There was hardly anyone else in the room and Dr Marco sat drumming his fingers against the wooden table as I ate. He seemed in a hurry to be off and, as I walked beside him through the outside corridors clogged with men, women and children, I understood why. There were two medical officers in the hospital and one was on leave, so he had to see all the patients in Casualty. Clearly this was no time to speak to him about the epileptic men. He took me to a small room with a desk and an examination bed. There were four men sitting outside this door, men whom he'd asked to come back to see me. One of them got up and extended his hand as I entered.

"Hello, I am Vusi. I will interpret for you."

"Hi Vusi. Thank you very much. Do you know what I am doing here?"

“I know that you want to speak to the men with the fits and the bad skin. And that you want to find out what the problem is.” He smiled. He had a friendly round face and his eyes had an inbuilt sparkle which made one want to smile back all the time. I asked him to speak to the three men waiting outside and ask them if I could speak to them and examine them. While he was doing this, I looked through my DIGS questionnaire. It was a thick document divided into sections and I skimmed through the headings. Demographic information, medical history, mini mental state examination. The whole history taking would probably take at least an hour for each person, longer if there were problems which had to be assessed in more detail.

Vusi and I sat down with our first patient. Or rather I sat on a sticky plastic chair behind a large wooden desk, the patient sat on the other side of the desk across from me and Vusi sat precariously balanced on the edge of the desk facing the patient with his back half turned towards me. This seemed to be his preference because he ignored the chair beside me even when I pointed it out. The first patient was John. He was 25 years old, single, worked on a farm as a labourer and slept in dormitory accommodation in the week. At weekends he went home to his family in Malkerns. We started off in English- he had a Standard 5 education but got a bit stuck on the routine question about adoption. Vusi intervened. After a long conversation in Siswati, he turned to me patiently.

“Doc, when you ask him if his mother and father are his real parents that he was born from, he is a bit confused. His father has three wives. He was born from the middle wife, but she die when he four years old. So the younger wife take him into her home to look after him. His father lose job and so cannot keep different houses for the wives, so they all live together, him John, and his brother from the same wife, then five children from the first wife and four from the younger wife. They not all alive now. Two die as babies and two more die of malaria few years ago.”

“Thanks Vusi, I’ve got that.” Opposite my desk was a window looking out onto the back of the hospital, a bare patch of land with the typical rich red earth of Swaziland. Attempts at planting some shrubs had been made,

but all that was left were a few low bushes and scattered tufts of thick ropy grass. It was nine o'clock and the sun was gently shadowing the land.

The question on religion, John answered as: "I go to the mission church here," after exchanging a look with Vusi. "Church of England," Vusi added.

Then we were on to the medical history. Most of this required Vusi's interpreting skills. There was a long list of past illnesses. John described the symptoms and Vusi made his interpreter's diagnosis and gave me a medical name. John had had bilharzia as a child. He called it river sickness. He had had malaria, but mildly with none of the frequent complications. He still had occasional relapses where he would be holed up for a few days with high fevers and rigors. He came to the hospital and got quinine which helped. He had had an infected thumb from an injury on the farm, and this had been amputated. He held up his left hand for me to see. There had been two admissions for pneumonia and one for an injury to his shoulder from falling off a truck. He had not had any head injury though.

"Vusi can you ask him about the fits? When they started. How he feels when they happen, if he remembers anything. If he has any warning that they are going to happen."

Vusi was a good interpreter. I found out later that he was a hospital orderly who helped with wheeling patients around, escorting them for X-rays and general help with the running of the Casualty. He was bright and keen to learn so soon picked up a number of medical terms and details. With the volume of patients seen, he soon acquired almost as much knowledge as a nurse. Unlike many interpreters I had worked with, who try to answer questions for the patient, Vusi gave faithful translations of what the person had said and then helped me paraphrase it to make sense of it in a medical way.

"He was eighteen when he first had the fit," he said. "He was walking outside with his friend when he fall down and shake. His friend tell him this. He don't remember. When he wake up, he on the ground, his arm sore from the fall and all he see around him is red, like the earth is red, like the world is ending."

"How long did it take him to recover?"

"Few minutes, but he feel," he struggled for a word, "not right for the rest of the day. Like his head full of clouds."

"And then, did he see a doctor?"

"No, he have no money. Only after third time he go see *sangoma*. And then after that he come to hospital here and they give him pills to take."

"Do the pills control the fits?"

"When he take them he don't have fits, but sometimes he run out of pills, then the fits start again." All of this seemed to be a fairly typical history of epilepsy.

"Did he have any tests? Brain scan? EEG?"

Vusi looked puzzled. "We don't have that here."

"Did he maybe go to a bigger hospital where they could have done it?"

"He never been out of the country and no hospitals in this country have these equipment."

"Okay, Vusi, the last few things I need to know from him are whether any of his family have fits and whether he smokes or drinks alcohol or takes any drugs."

A long conversation ensued and finally Vusi said: "No-one in his family has fits, but some of his friends do. Some of them also have the skin marks that he has, but no-one in his family. He smoke rolled up tobacco that he get from boss and he drink African beer at weekend."

"So why the long conversation with him, Vusi?"

"He not understand about drugs. He not take any of your western drugs. No heroin or mandrax or such like. But all men here eat mushrooms, and sometimes mushrooms not good and make them sick and see things. Also sometimes he get herbs from *sangoma*. So I try to find out about that, but I don't think anything that could give him fits."

I decided to go into this at a later stage. It was now 10.30 and the room was baking hot. I got up to open the window wider, and was immediately met by the intrusion of a wasp. I stepped back with an involuntary cry and Vusi and John both laughed.

"Sorry," Vusi said. "You not used to our insects. Maybe you want to break for tea now?"

“I still need to examine him. Can he wait?”

“He take day off from work, so he can wait,” Vusi said.

“He took the whole day off to come and see me,” I exclaimed in dismay.

“It’s okay,” Vusi said, “doctor tell him to come. He give him letter for farmer.”

“Vusi, I think I better examine him quickly then we can have tea.”

I did the mini mental state examination as I examined John. It was basically just to check if he was orientated for time, place and person and if he had any mood disturbances or psychotic thoughts. This all seemed fine. According to his account he had never had any episodes of strange behaviour. He was a fit young man, though with his fair share of scars and small traumas, including the amputated thumb. His heart, lungs, and abdomen were fine and a check of the tone and power in his arms and legs was normal. He winced in advance as I produced my reflex hammer and tapped his knee. Vusi laughed.

“He think you want to hit him.” I was somewhat surprised that no-one seemed to have done this test before in a man who had seizures. What was of interest was the thin line of bead-like papules on his eyelids, just above the eyelashes. Inside his mouth were whitish patches on the oral mucosa extending down his throat, which gave a reason for the hoarseness of his voice, and on his elbows were hard warty patches. I didn’t get very far with questioning him about these. He didn’t seem to have noticed the hoarseness of his voice. This obviously caused him no problems. The warty elbows he put down to leaning on them and he told Vusi a long story about how he leaned his chin on his bent arms whenever he sat down to eat or drink or relax. Vusi dutifully repeated this to me. I asked if he would be prepared to have a blood sample taken and I noticed some smaller warty growth in the soft area on the other side of his elbow where I sought for a vein. I took blood for the standard chromosome studies and a bit extra for special testing. I would have liked to take a biopsy of the warty lesions but didn’t have my kit with me, so I ended the consultation by asking if he had any questions and if he would be prepared to come back if I needed him to.

It was now 11 o'clock, hot and humid. Sweat streamed down my back and Vusi's face was shiny with it. He took me back to the barn-like room where some left over sandwiches lay on the counter and a boiling urn spewed out a small cup of warm water. It looked like we had missed tea time. Vusi was at pains to explain to me that lunch took place here at 1 o'clock sharp. All the staff in the hospital came and it would not be good to be late. I would have liked to sit down for a few minutes and catch my breath. Thoughts of the dinner party at Macy's place came into my mind. The cosy Victorian room and the buzz of conversation and the feel of Gabriel's hand at my elbow, solicitous and protecting. I had not had much time to think about what had happened that night and I wished that this whirl of activity had not happened at this time. Now though, after a quick cup of luke warm coffee and a drooping cheese and lettuce sandwich, we headed back to the clinic.

The basic history in the next patient went a bit more quickly. His name was Mkhulunkosi, he was twenty years old and he spoke no English. Everything was fairly straightforward. He had one mother and father and two sisters whom he lived with. He had had no previous illnesses except for coughs and colds and he did not smoke or drink or take any herbs. However, when it came to the history about the fits, it seemed that he was one of the men with 'strange behaviour'. The fits had started a year ago but, before that, he had other experiences.

Vusi said: "Doc, he say he had *amafufunyana*."

"What is that, Vusi?"

"It is hard to explain. Basically means he was bewitched."

"Maybe you better ask him to describe what happened."

"He say he can't remember but people tell him that he was laughing all the time. For hours on end in voice like a woman. Then after few hours, he get very aggressive. He remember pulling a thick branch off a tree and hitting everything in his path. He mostly hit against the ground but he also break a wheelbarrow and a clay pot. Another time he fight with his younger sister and break her arm."

“And how was he feeling at the time? Does he remember? Was he angry or unhappy with life or upset?” I asked.

Vusi spoke to Mkhulunkosi for a long time. In the end he shrugged his shoulders and said: “All he say is *amafufunyana*. Ancestors angry with him. Voices from his stomach telling him to do these things.”

“Why are the ancestors angry?” I asked.

“He doesn’t know. Often it is so where the person does not know reason.”

It was now quarter to one, the sun was at its peak and I saw Vusi looking at his watch every few minutes. I did a quick examination, saw the pale beaded eyelids like the previous man and small white spots just under his tongue. There were a few small red spots on his chest but no skin lesions anywhere else. I took some blood and decided to call it a day with Mkhulunkosi. We headed to the dining room for lunch.

5.

The hall was occupied this time. I saw Dr Marco sitting at a table with two other men. After leading me to this table, Vusi wandered off to join a table of men in white pants and tops whom I assumed were hospital orderlies or nurses. I would have preferred to stay and chat to him but that did not appear to be the protocol. Dr Marco asked me how things were going while anxiously scoffing his food as though he might be called away before finishing. One of the two men at the table was the hospital superintendent and the other was a visitor from the Department of Health. They both seemed keen to make me feel at home and kept asking if they could do anything to help. The man from the health department had been primed by someone from above and was obviously checking up on the hospital to see that they were facilitating things for me. I smiled at this familiar bureaucracy and power play. At exactly one forty five, Vusi came over to fetch me to go back to the clinic.

The afternoon consisted of interviews with three more men. None of them spoke English, so I had to rely entirely on Vusi. The questioning was

frustrating. All of them had some signs of strange behaviour as well as epilepsy and the skin papules on the eyelids. It was difficult to get proper stories from them regarding the mental problems. Vusi did his best to help but I could see that he was struggling as the translation was more than just one of language. Interviewee number three, a twenty nine year old and the oldest I had seen so far, had had fits for six years and had ended up in jail twice for bar brawls. It was hard to ascertain the circumstances, though he said that he had not been himself and everyone in the bar had irritated him. Number four and five were both nineteen with very little schooling and spoke again about *amafufunyana*. When I had finished with the examinations and the blood sampling, it was five o'clock and Vusi told me that we should call it a day.

"You should rest now, Doc. It's been a long day," he smiled sympathetically.

"Yes, I guess so," I said. "Vusi, are there any shops nearby if I wanted to buy anything?"

"Nearest shop is two kilometres from here."

"Is the hospital cafeteria open for supper?"

"Ah," his bright face lit up, "you hungry?"

"Well no, not right now. I was just asking for later."

"Hospital cafeteria closed but doctors all live in staff quarters and go to church mission dining hall at seven. Nurses also go there. You eat with them." This didn't really appeal to me but I waved goodbye to Vusi as he retrieved his backpack from his locker and set off down the road. I went back to my room which still retained the heat from the day's sun. I had a cool shower with the gecko watching from its spot on the ceiling. Even in this short time I seemed to have got used to him and he seemed more a familiar room mate than a threat. I decided that I didn't really want to eat again as lunch had been quite a large meal, so I took out my notes and started going through them.

Five men, all young – under 30. All with white papules on their eyelids. Some with other skin lesions but none exactly the same. All five had

epilepsy and four had some form of psychotic behaviour, though in two of those interviewed this afternoon it was hard to say whether they were just slightly delinquent young men or whether this was really abnormal behaviour. I tried to find common threads.

I took out a crisp sheet of white paper and started a mind map. In the centre I drew a circle and in the middle wrote: "epilepsy, skin lesions, psychosis." From here I began radiating out spokes to indicate possible causes. The first was genetic. This, after all, was the reason why I had been called out here. Against this was the fact that the men were not obviously related. Perhaps I needed to do a detailed family tree of the whole community to see if there were any genetic relations.

Next I wrote down tropical infection at the end of a long curly arrow. I had taken specimens to test for all of these, but I thought this would be unlikely with no physical signs of any kind.

A toxin or drug was the other differential that could account for strange behaviour, but probably not for the epilepsy and not for the skin lesions. With these thoughts running through my mind, I walked out onto the stoep and almost bumped into Dr Marco who was about to knock on my door to invite me for supper. I told him that I was not hungry and he seemed rather distressed and apologised for his lack of hospitality. Just that he had such a busy day. I reassured him that I was fine, really not hungry and we could catch up in the next few days.

And so I stood on the stoep breathing in the purple scent of the jacaranda trees as the light faded and the bullfrogs began their night chorus. Soon the sky would be patterned with stars, and I thought again of Gabriel. After that whirlwind night of the lecture and the party and the intimate conversation in the Planetarium's parking lot, he had taken my hand as he opened the door of my car for me and asked me for my phone number. "And here's mine," he added, "just so you can find me. So that you know I am not a stranger."

He phoned the night before I left, but it was a brief conversation and a reminder about his invitation to take me to the eclipse watching when I got back. Phone contact at Lubombo was difficult and there was no cell phone

reception, so it would be weeks before we made contact again. I had said that I wasn't up for anything. Was that true? Could I dare to take a risk again? It had been many years since Samuel; surely I couldn't let that scare me off forever.

6.

The next day dawned bright and hot and, armed with some thoughts from my mind mapping exercise the night before, I saw another six men with Vusi. It was similarly difficult to get proper histories from them. I concentrated more on their family connections but they all had different mothers and fathers.

I managed to catch the superintendent at tea time as there were some things I had to ask him. I needed to know how many men were involved and when this had all started. According to the superintendent it was confined to the Lubombo area which had a population of about five hundred people and there were fifty five men with epilepsy. He wasn't sure whether they all had skin lesions and he didn't know how many had psychotic behaviour, but he could think of at least ten off hand, either because they had been brought to the hospital in a violent state, needing people to hold them down and carry them in, or because they had come in as a result of a violent act against someone else. The final straw had been the violent killing which Ulysses had described to me. Apparently that boy was in a high security prison in another part of the country. When they heard that I was coming the hospital staff had collected the names of all the epileptic men that they had on record.

"Dr Marco is very good with his record keeping," the superintendent said. "He gives us a detailed report every month of what illnesses are seen here." I wondered why they used epilepsy as their inclusion point and not the abnormal behaviour, but I could not get a clear answer on this, other than that they had been asked to collect men with possible brain pathology.

That evening I did go across to the Mission Hall for supper, mainly so that I could talk to Dr Marco, who was far too busy and elusive during the

day. It turned out that Dr Marco had trained in Cuba. Like all doctors from Cuba, his training had streamed him from early on, so that he had specialised in internal medicine and was very good at it, but had very rudimentary knowledge of surgery, paediatrics, *etc.* This explained why the absence of his colleague stressed him so much. He now had to do all the surgery as well, and he did not feel at ease with this.

“Dr Marco, I need to know your opinion on this illness affecting the young men,” I ventured as he scooped a spoonful of rice and beef stew into his mouth.

He chewed rapidly and I felt awkward that I was interrupting a meal which he obviously relished.

“I think they just have epilepsy,” he said.

“But ten percent of the population is quite a lot. And it does seem to be confined to this area.” I speared a potato onto my fork. “Also, what about the psychotic behaviour?”

He raised an eyebrow, tilting his head sideways. “Lots of birth trauma round here. Women come in late in advanced labour and the babies are oxygen deprived.”

“That doesn’t explain why the fits start in young adulthood. If it was birth related, they should start straight away. And it only affects men.”

He looked interested for the first time and laid down his knife and fork across the plate. He leaned back in the wooden slatted chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Hmm,” he said. “There is lots of syphilis around. Could affect the nervous system.”

“But that wouldn’t cause fits.” I replied.

He now seemed more interested, as though this were a puzzle worth spending some time on.

“HIV?” I asked.

“One of my first thoughts. We tested them all. 20% positive, the rest negative. Less than the overall incidence in the population.”

“What about the skin lesions?” I asked.

A woman in a light blue uniform brought us each a bowl of ice-cream and canned peaches. Dr Marco took it from her eagerly. His pale green

shirt stretched tightly over his protuberant belly, covered by the white coat which he still wore. He looked like he would be happier wearing a tie if it were not so hot.

“Must say I didn’t take that much notice of them till it was brought up by you. People round here have all kinds of skin problems. Tribal markings that get infected, mosquito bites that leave scars, pock marks from chickenpox which they scratch. Lots of warts too.”

“Yes, but these are quite unusual. The white papules along the eyelids.”

He leaned towards me. “What do you think it is, Dr Brown?”

Automatically I said: “Lena, please.”

“I am Roderiques,” he smiled and gave a formal half bow. He really was quite a dapper man and probably good at his job if he wasn’t snowed under with the number of patients he had to deal with single-handed.

“Roderiques, I honestly don’t know. I need much more information before I can begin to make a diagnosis.” I decided to confide in him. “When I was asked to come out here it was on the assumption that this was lipoid proteinosis, a genetic dominant condition.” Dr Marco spooned the last of the syrupy peaches into his mouth. Mine remained untouched.

“Clinically, it would fit perfectly, but there is no genetic connection between the men.”

“Well, the men they say are their fathers may not truly be their fathers,” he said, almost apologetically as though this was an impolite thing to say to me.

“I thought of that, but they are all between eighteen and thirty, so one or two men would have had to be very busy to impregnate sixty different women. Also, why only men? Lipoid proteinosis affects both sexes. It is not X-linked.”

“A medical mystery, then,” Dr Marco said, pushing his chair back from the table. “I’m afraid I can’t help you. Now you must excuse me. I need to write up my notes and then go to bed. Tomorrow is another busy day.”

“One last question, Dr Marco. I am struggling with getting histories.”

“Vusi is the best interpreter we have.”

“It’s not the language so much as getting through to the patients. I need to know their symptoms, but they talk about bewitchment.”

Dr Marco laughed, a thick hearty laugh which went on for several seconds.

“That is part of practising medicine here, Lena. These people look at things differently. They don’t think in terms of bacteria and viruses or immune systems. They see things in terms of punishments and threats from bad spirits or bad people. Ask Vusi to explain it to you.” He slid his chair back under the table. “And now, goodnight. If I can help, talk to me again tomorrow.”

7.

The next day dawned with thunder and lightening and grey-black skies, followed by a light swishing rain which soon accelerated to a heavy bead curtain of drops. The rain fell surprisingly quietly for its volume. Like a swarm of ants coming in on a mission, working swiftly and methodically and then leaving. Within an hour the rain was over and the sun started to paint the sky light pink. If I had wondered whether the rain would keep patients away, it was soon clear that this was not the case. The outside corridors of Casualty were crowded as usual and I felt sorry for Dr Marco struggling his way valiantly through all the illnesses and all the people. No wonder he didn’t really have time to give much thought to a few dozen men with epilepsy. Vusi was waiting at the door to our consulting room.

“Morning Doc. Ten men turn up today. We better work fast.”

My heart sank at the thought of rushing through these complicated stories.

“Okay Vusi, let’s go then.”

The first three men were very similar, all between twenty and twenty five, all with epilepsy for the past two to three years, all with the characteristic white papules and none with any abnormal behaviour to report.

The next man came in with a woman accompanying him. They introduced themselves as Makhosini and Annie. Annie was a large woman with a round smiling face and she wore a colourful dress with a matching scarf round her head. She used her hands a lot when she spoke. Makhosini was tall and thin and quiet.

As I started taking the history, Annie chipped in that she had seen some episodes of strange behaviour in the past two years and she wanted to tell me about them because Makhosini did not remember. She told me that she was a social worker and worked in the community and had worked closely with some of the men I was talking to.

I asked the standard questions about schooling, occupation, drugs, medical illnesses and family. There was nothing unusual here. Makhosini was twenty eight and he and Annie had been married for four years. The fits had started three years ago. I asked Makhosini what he remembered of his behaviour. He recalled one occasion when he'd been to a bar and couldn't remember how he got home. His friends told him later that he had been loud and argumentative, not his usual self. He had had two beers and this had never happened to him before.

"And what can you tell me, Annie?"

"I met Mak six years ago and there was nothing wrong with him. We got married and started trying to have a child. Nothing happened. But soon after we started trying, Mak had a fit one night. It was the first time it happened and it hasn't happened again." I asked her to describe what had happened. "We were lying down together and suddenly his eyes pulled to the side and his body started jerking. Both arms and legs. His jaw was clenched and his body went stiff, and then it stopped. It lasted less than a minute. Afterwards I saw that his tongue was bleeding. Mak does not remember anything. He was a bit confused afterwards and it took about half an hour for him to come right."

"And it never happened again?"

"No."

"Did he see anyone or take any medication?"

“We came to the hospital and the doctor said he didn’t need medicine if it was only one fit. He would need if it happened again.”

“Okay, you also said that he had some strange behaviour?”

Annie pulled the knot in her headscarf and stole a sideways look at Makhosini. He was sitting passively, hands in his lap, looking down. “It happened three times. The time in the bar that Mak has talked about, I did not see. I think maybe he just drank too much.”

“I only had two beers,” Makhosini interrupted.

“Do you usually drink more?” I asked.

“I go out with my friends on weekends and we drink beers and sometimes *umqombothi* – traditional beer, you know. Very, very few times do I have more than four beers and never never have I forgotten where I am or how I got home,” he said.

“Did your friends go home with you? Do they know what happened?”

“No,” Makhosini said with a worried frown, “they say I left early and they stayed on at the bar. Annie was out at her mother when I got home. I felt strange and went to bed, and the next morning I could remember nothing from the night before.”

“What about the episodes you saw, Annie?” I asked.

“Well the first time I hardly took notice. We were out at a party and we were sitting together with other friends round the fire. I turned to Mak and asked him to pass me more meat. He was looking up at the sky and he took no notice of me. I nudged him and told him he was being rude. He just carried on looking up at the sky. I was laughing with my friends and so I took no notice. Thought maybe he was upset about something. Until the next time it happened.”

Vusi shifted in his chair. He had moved from his perch on the edge of the desk after the first day. Now he leaned forward in the white plastic chair, his chin on his hand.

“The next time,” Annie continued, “we were watching TV, just me and Mak, but I was also writing some notes for the next day. Next minute Mak starts laughing hysterically. I looked at the TV to see what was so funny, but it was a serious programme. I asked Mak what was funny, but then I

saw that his eyes were glazed and he was staring straight ahead. I turned his head and he stared straight through me before he pushed my hand away. He pushed me away with a great force, and then he got up from the chair and walked out of the house.”

“What did you do, Annie?” I looked at Mak sitting passively listening to this account of his behaviour. He certainly didn’t seem the violent type.

“I was scared. I went to my mother and stayed there the night.”

“Had Mak been drinking that day?”

“No, it was a work day. He came from work, said he was tired. We had supper and then sat and watched the TV for a while.”

“Did anything else unusual happen that day, before maybe?” I asked.

“No. Nothing I can think of,” Annie answered.

“What about you, Makhosini. Can you think of anything that happened that day? What do you remember?”

Makhosini spoke quietly in a deep voice. He seemed embarrassed by the questions and didn’t make eye contact. “It was a normal day at work. I drove the van with supplies for the shops from Big Bend to Manzini. We did three trips. That was why I was so tired.” Makhosini told me that he was a truck driver for the sugar cane factory and that his days were spent driving up and down between towns.

“Anything happen in Manzini? Did you talk to anyone new? Did you eat there?”

“I had my sandwiches that Annie makes me. Too much money to buy food there. I spoke to the the men where I offloaded the cane. Some of them I know well. Friends.” He smiled.

“Who did you see there Mak?” Annie touched his arm.

“Oh, I can’t remember. Usually there is Akhona, Bheki, Dudu. Oh, I do remember there was that Zambian guy, Jackie. He asked me when we were having a baby.”

“Mak, I hope you are not discussing our personal business with other people.” Annie frowned.

“You know I am not Annie, but I think people know there is a problem. He was asking me about cures to fall pregnant.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“I told him about Vuka Vuka.”

“Eh, Mak you know that is nonsense.”

I sensed some tension between the two starting to develop and tried to bring us back to the subject. “Let’s talk about the third time you saw Mak’s behaviour to be strange, Annie,” I said.

I was making notes on my notepad and so only registered the silence after a minute or two. Looking up, I saw that Annie’s head was bent and her hands clutched together in her lap. Mak was sitting with his arm across the back of her chair, not touching her and looking in her direction but past her.

“Annie?” I said.

She lifted her head and I saw tears in her eyes.

“We don’t have to go on if you don’t want to.”

“No, Doc, I must tell you. But it is very sore. Only you must know so maybe you can help Mak. Find out what is wrong with him,” she whispered.

“Okay, Annie,” I leaned forward and touched her arm. “Take it slowly and stop when you want to.”

“The third time,” she said, her voice faltering. “The third time,” she said again, summoning strength through a deep inbreath which slipped out through her lips in a sigh, “he came home at night. I was already in bed. Mak stood in the middle of the bedroom floor like a statue. He didn’t speak to me and he seemed to be looking right through me. Then he stripped off all his clothes. He was like a robot, his movements. Each piece of clothes fell to the floor next to him – his shirt, his trousers, his socks, his pants.” Her voice faltered again but she carried on. “He stood there in the middle of the floor naked as the day he was born and he had a ... I don’t know how you call it. He was hard and it stood out from his body like a stick.

“You may not think this strange, doctor, but Mak he always takes a bit of time for this. I have to be patient with him. Also, he never takes off all his clothes like that. He is a bit shy. We have a way together the two of us, and this was not our way. I tried to talk to him, but it was like he was in another world. He walked over to the bed and climbed straight on top of me.

I was reading a book and he took it from me and threw it on the floor. I shouted at him and tried to twist away from him. But he held me down and then he forced himself on me.”

Annie stopped with a gulp and sat weeping softly, her hands still clutched together in her lap. Mak sat in the chair beside her, his head in his hands and his legs turned inwards at an awkward angle.

This had taken me by surprise, both Annie’s unexpected confession and the candour of it. Mak obviously seemed traumatised but at a loss for what to do.

“Annie, I am sorry,” I said after a while. “Can I get you some water? Or would you like a moment alone?”

She shook her head firmly. “No, Doc, you carry on. Ask what you want to know.”

“Well, I presume this is the first time Mak was violent with you?”

She nodded. “You know and I know too that there are some men who force themselves on their women or beat them up. I see this often with my work too. But Mak and me, we were never like that. Never. He is always the gentlest person in the world.”

“Did it ever happen again?” I asked.

“No,” she shook her head, “but it has hurt me and I cannot be myself with him now.”

I turned to Mak who was looking helplessly at his wife. “Mak, do you want to say anything of what happened that night?”

“I don’t remember. I went out with friends. We had some *braai* meat and I went home. I remember waking up the next morning, that is all.”

“Did you drink anything?”

“One beer, that’s all. I was only there about half an hour.”

“No drugs, herbs, anything like that?”

He hesitated then shook his head.

“And you remember nothing?” I asked again.

“Only waking up the next morning. Annie was gone and I didn’t see her till that night. When she came in she acted like she was scared of me. Only

later she told me what happened. I cannot believe that I would hurt my Annie. It was not me.”

“Do you have any idea what could have happened? Or you, Annie?” I asked, looking at both of them.

Mak had reached across and taken her hand and she held tightly to it, the other hand still slack in her lap.

“I think perhaps we should call it a day. I would like you both to come and see me again because this has obviously been a very, very difficult thing for you both and you will need some help working through it. Would you do that?” They both agreed. “Maybe tomorrow or the next day then?”

We still had five men to see and it was lunch time and I was drained. Vusi saw this and took things in hand. He wanted to send the men off and get them back the next day.

“Thanks, Vusi. But let’s have lunch and then come back. I can’t have these men waste another day.” This time, Vusi sat down at the lunch table with me. Dr Marco was nowhere in sight, probably still wading through his patient load. Vusi insisted on filling both our plates with fresh mealies, beef stew and rice.

“You should come with me one day to my house and I will show you how we have fun and have party,” he said. “You look so tired and you are alone here. You need a break.”

I realised that I knew almost nothing about Vusi, whether he had a family or not, where he lived, what his life was like. I made up my mind to engage him about this when I felt up to it. The rest of the meal we ate in silence and then we went back to interview the remaining men. All of them required extensive interpreting and at the end of the day the predominant feature was bewitchment.

I slumped across the table as the last man departed. Vusi brought me a cup of tea and smiled sympathetically. Then he said quietly: “You are really trying to help these people, but this won’t work. You have to get inside their heads.”

“But that’s exactly what I’m trying to do.”

“No, you’ve been getting inside your head and trying to see their thoughts through your eyes.”

I looked at him, ponderingly. “So what should I do, then?”

“Go see where they live. Meet their families. Understand their fears. Know their gods.”

“But how do I do that?”

“We will talk tomorrow. I think you should rest tonight. It has been a hard day.”

8.

Kingston Ingovazana Mabilu was a tall, thin man with a long face the colour and texture of knotted oak. Though this should have made him appear old, it did not. In fact it was difficult to gauge his age, though I guessed that he must be in his late forties. He had tribal markings on his cheeks and hair that stood up in a recalcitrant wave on one side. He had tried to comb it back off his forehead which was large and prominent. He extended his hand to shake mine in the traditional way with the left hand cupping his elbow and the right diffidently positioned. His grip, however, was warm and strong and somehow reassuring. I had been told that Ingovazana meant owl, presumably because he was regarded as a wise man, but something about him reminded me more of an eagle in flight. Perhaps it was the slight forward stoop or the posture of his arms drawn back from his sides and bent at the elbows.

The hot red earth seemed to steam around us as we stood at the entrance to his house. In the background chickens clucked and women stood at a trough slapping wet washing against the sides and rubbing it hard against their knuckles.

“Do come inside, Dr Brown,” his voice was deep and rough like water flowing over granite.

Vusi motioned me inside, obviously worried that I would not follow protocol. Two days ago, after that draining day of interviews and the encounter with Annie and Mak, he had come to me and spoken about

meeting the Chief. I had been resistant to the idea but Vusi had insisted that it would help, that the people would listen to the Chief and speak more freely.

“In our custom, the village Chief is responsible for everything. He gives advice and permission for things to happen in the village. You should speak to him. It will be better.”

However, it was what he said after that which had convinced me. “He is different to what you think, Lena. More like you than like me and yet we all respect his wisdom and know that he stands across two worlds. His head is in one world but his heart is in another – with us and our ancestors. And he knows us like no-one else because he knows with his heart as well as his head. Because of this he will help you to understand. And when you understand, you will know better what questions to ask.” This had intrigued me and so I agreed to come along and meet Chief Ingovazana.

The village was two kilometres from the hospital and we had taken the small minibus taxi that drove between the two places in the morning and the afternoon. The interior of Ingovazana’s house was furnished in a mixture of Western and African styles: a black leather sofa, zebra skin on the floor, glass and chrome table in the centre of the room, red woven replicas of the Swaziland flag on the leather chairs. There was a framed picture of the king on the wall. Ingovazana sat down on a large leather chair, his beige chinos and colourful shirt sinking into the upholstery. The white fur cuffs at his wrists rested gently on the chair arms as his long fingers curled against them.

“What can I do for you, Doctor?” he smiled, his eyes alert, scanning my face.

I was suddenly unsure how to proceed. Everyone else seemed to know why I was here. Vusi had said that I needed to get to know the people and their customs so that I could get proper histories and get nearer to finding out the problem. But this man was sitting here smiling at me as though he had no idea what was going on. And yet, behind the eyes, there was a sparkling, a knowledge, almost a ... wisdom.

“Well, your Department of Health has asked me to come and look into the problem with your young men,” I started.

He inclined his head.

“I haven’t managed to get very far. So Vusi said I should come and talk to you. Get your permission, and your advice.”

The smile seemed to harden slightly. “It seems to me that you started without my permission, so really what you are asking for is my advice?”

I could feel my face redden as I started stammeringly to try to explain. Ingovazana held up his hand and said quietly: “What is the problem you are having?”

How to explain this? I had tried to take histories as I was taught. Tried to get a family tree, to explore illnesses in the family, to clarify symptoms, to find out when the illnesses had started. All this had been met with polite smiles and explanations about the country and enquiries about my health and welfare, and then the inevitable *amafufunyana*.

“I am trying to find a reason why your young men are having the fits and the skin problems and the... err, strange behaviour, and so I am talking to them to get more information,” I started.

The hand moved from the chair to toy with the long wooden *knobkierie* by his side. “So! You want to find an explanation for the psychosis of my people.”

“How do you know that word?” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

He threw back his head and laughed, an uproarious, full blooded, unrestrained laugh.

“I studied Medicine,” he said. “In London,” he added, seeing the look on my face.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“I am the half brother of the king,” he explained. “We have the same mother. He was sent to England to study. Politics and economics. Someone had to accompany him. And that was me. I had always been interested in plants and herbal cures and how the body worked. So, while the king went to study political philosophy, I studied Medicine.”

“Why don’t you practice it then? Why are you here as a tribal chief?”

“Because I saw the light. I realized in my third year that the way Medicine was practiced in the West was wrong.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I was a third year medical student, just starting the clinical years, when my father became ill with heart failure. He was seventy years old and had had two heart attacks, but he was strong, got up at five every morning and drove to his farm to check on the cattle. His mind was strong too. This time though, he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat. Our local hospital had given him water pills, but they no longer helped. It had been three months and he was getting worse. It wasn’t a heart attack and they didn’t know how to help him further, so we took him to the hospital in Nelspruit. We took him by car and my brother drove while I sat in the back with him, supporting him. I remember how each bump in the road made him wince and he said he could feel his heart pounding against his rib cage. But he held on, asking every half an hour or so, how much longer it would be till he got to the big hospital where they would help him.

“It took us five hours. Those days the roads were mostly untarred and we had to stop often to allow herds of cattle to cross the road. I remember holding on to his hand very tightly and telling him that we were almost there. Almost there. Almost there where he would be made better.

“When we reached Nelspruit, we went straight to the Casualty. An efficient young doctor in a white coat came over and asked what the trouble was. He didn’t look at my father more than a glance. He looked at me and my brother.

“He is in cardiac failure, I said. He asked if there was any chest pain. No, no chest pain. They put up a drip and hooked him up to an ECG machine and took bloods, all without talking to him. Then finally the doctor began his history taking.”

‘What is the problem?’

‘I am short of breath.’

‘When did it start?’

‘It starts at night when I go to bed.’

‘But how long ago did it start?’

‘Two nights ago when I came back from the toilet and lay down, I couldn’t breathe. My heart gave a big jolt and I felt I had to gasp for breath. The air in front of me went blue and the ceiling spun around. I thought I felt my father in the room with me.’

The doctor interrupted. ‘So no chest pain, nausea, sweating? Any swelling of the legs?’

‘Yes, my left leg is swollen. Ever since I had the accident where the tractor ran over my foot, it swells up in the heat. Sometimes it is the whole foot, sometimes it goes up to the knee. See, I still have the tracks on my middle finger where I put out my hand to protect myself.’

‘Yes, but do you have swelling of both ankles, besides from your accident?’

‘No, just what I told you.’

“In the end I saw the doctor writing two lines: 70 year old man, previous infarct, two day history of shortness of breath and orthopnoea, no symptoms of ischemia. Frail and rambling.

“They put him in a corner and we waited four hours for the results of the blood tests and the ECG, and no-one spoke to us or told us what was going on or what we were waiting for. After a long time, the doctor came back and said that the results were all clear and we could go home with a prescription for some pills.

“I told him that we already had water pills at home, but he wasn’t listening and said that we could just increase the dose.

“I realized two things that night. One was that there is a fundamental mismatch between doctors and patients in the way that they talk and think. Patients tell their stories. Doctors listen for key words, which they place side by side like a puzzle to patch together a pattern which they call a diagnosis. This difference is so vast that it is like two people communicating in different languages.

“The second is that doctors wear their white coats like suits of armour. Some use them as protection from the pain of truly knowing another human being with all his anger, anguish and flaws. Others use it as a weapon to show their superiority and their control. They use it to show that they are

in charge. I decided that night that I did not want to be a doctor in this way. I had wanted to be a healer, but what I saw was not healing.”

The silence that followed this story was the first of many similar silences that I experienced with Kingston Ingovozana Mabilu. A silence laden with volume, but where one had to reach deep into the centre of hearing to understand the sounds. A silence that sang to a higher tune, vibrating on the invisible trip wires of reality.

“So, that has answered your question, Dr Brown, but it hasn’t answered mine. How can I help you?”

“Well, as I said, I’m trying to find out what is causing the affliction in these men.” I seemed suddenly at a loss for words. Surely this man would have thought of this and he had the knowledge to know how to refer or in which direction to point them. If he hadn’t done so, how would I find out anything?

He sat looking at me impassively, his furred wrists relaxed on the arms of the chair.

I continued. “I am struggling to get proper histories from many of them. They do not give an account of their symptoms and many of them only talk of bewitchment.”

“*Amafufunyana?*” He raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“And you think that is not so?”

Taken aback, I hesitated. “Do you believe it is?” I did not know how to read this strange man with his Western medical background, but his clear rejection of it.

“Actually, I don’t know,” he smiled, “but they believe it and that is what’s important. What we believe makes us who we are.”

“But what’s important is to find out the cause for their affliction. Surely?” I said.

“Find the cause so that you can do what?” he asked.

“So that they can be treated.”

“And aren’t they treated already?” he asked.

He smiled at my surprised look. "Tell me, Dr Brown, who asked you to come here and look into this... problem?"

"Well, I had a phone call from a young intern who was visiting Lubombo, ended up in the hospital after an accident and noticed the men with epilepsy and skin lesions. He had read a paper of mine and thought it might be a genetic condition, so he phoned me."

"And you left your job, took time off work and came out here, why? Out of curiosity? Out of the goodness of your heart?"

"No, your government is paying me to investigate," I said.

"Ah, we reach the crux of the matter. Do you know who is paying you?"

"Not really, I think the Department of Health."

"And how long ago is it since they contacted you?" He took a long sip from the glass of water at his side and gestured towards the glass which a young girl had shyly brought in and put at my elbow, asking if I would like some more. My throat was dry but I shook my head.

"About six months ago," I replied.

"And the... problem. It has been going on for how long?" he asked softly.

"It seems like up to six years in some people."

"Then why do you think you've only been consulted now?"

I remained silent, thoughts swirling in my head. What was he getting at? Was he suggesting that I was being used in some way?

As though he had read my thoughts, he said: "Politics, my dear doctor. What you don't know is that a year ago the Health Department received a very large grant to improve health services in the country. Now they are being audited and they have to show some results." He sipped from his glass again. "What better to show than a bright young doctor – are you a professor?" I shook my head as he continued, "who comes all the way from Cape Town and finds a cause for a condition affecting a group of men in a small village. A good use of money, hmm?"

The hot stillness in the room grew and the buzzing flies sounded very loud. In the distance the slaps of the women washing at the trough rang

out, interspersed with their peals of laughter and excited chatter. I looked round for Vusi but he was no longer in the room.

"I am not putting you on the spot, Dr Brown," he said, his voice soft. "I am just saying that things are not always what they appear to be."

I regained my composure and finally did take a long sip from the glass. "All right, Sir, even if your government has ulterior motives, I am a doctor and it is my duty to help, and that is what I intend to do."

"Then I ask again, what is it you would like my help with?"

I thought quickly. "Two things," I said. "Firstly, can you explain to me what *amafufunyana* is, and secondly, what is your view of the sickness in these men? You are their chief and you don't seem too concerned."

Kingston Ingovazana Mabilu nodded his head slowly, keeping his hooded eyes fixed on me. "I will answer your second question first," he said slowly. "You say the men need treatment. They are getting treatment for their fits. Good Western medicine, and it works. The skin beads do not worry them. They cause them no problems, so why do they need treatment for those?"

I inclined my head. Of course he was right. "But it is the underlying cause that is the issue. And of course the psychosis."

"I think that finding the underlying cause is just a way of settling your curiosity. That is another thing I did not like about Western medicine. Strings and strings of research projects, with what result? Mostly just to satisfy the intellect. My people have other ways to make their lives meaningful."

"The psychosis," I reminded him. "People have been killed. That is serious and warrants a solution."

"One boy. Only one boy who killed," he said sadly.

"Perhaps, but other bad things have happened." I hesitated but, seeing his scepticism, I went on. "A woman was raped."

"Impossible. I would have known about it."

"What happens in people's homes is not always known to you, I am sure," I said quietly.

"You are sure?"

I nodded.

“All right,” he said. “Tell me what you have found out and I will work with you. The wellbeing of my people is my only concern.” His face was grave as he said this.

“And what about my second question, *amafufunyana*?” I asked.

“To understand that, you will need to understand who we are as a people, how we think, what we believe in.”

This reminded me of what Vusi had said. “Understand their fears, know their gods.”

“I am willing to show you, Dr Brown, if you are willing.”

“Please call me Lena,” I whispered.

“Then call me Kingston.” He smiled at my uncertain look. “It will come easier to your tongue and, after all, I am not your chief.”

9.

Kingston’s proposal churned back and forth in my mind as I lay on the narrow bed in the doctors’ quarters, the smell of jacaranda blossom wafting through the windows and the hot dry dust of the day settling on the window panes. It made sense to try to understand the culture, especially as I seemed to be stuck with the information I had so far. And yet, to spend two weeks in the village with strangers whose language I didn’t understand was daunting. And yet, I thought back to Sipiwe’s stories from my childhood and how they had fascinated me. Stories of magic and adventure and strange words which conjured up new worlds for me.

But there was something more, something about Kingston himself that tugged at me. He had a calmness about him, a peace. And also the things that he said held a strong conviction, as though everything he said he knew through a deep sense of experience. He had started telling me about *ubuntu*, the African concept of community.

“Come and stay here, Lena, and I will show it to you. It is not something that is learned in theory. You have to live it. Stay with us for

two weeks; it is not long, but maybe enough for you to get a sense of what I mean.”

I had spoken to Vusi and he seemed surprised at first and then delighted. “This is wonderful, such an honour for you. You can come meet my family. My cousin is getting married next week and you must come to the wedding.” Carried away by his excitement, he started making all sorts of plans for my time. Seeing my reluctance, however, he said: “Don’t worry, it will be good. Ingovozana has big house. He has many women living with him. They will take care of you.”

“Many women?” I asked perplexed.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “Ah, now I see why you worry. But no, I mean he has relatives living in his house and also someone to cook for him and look after his business, his appointments. And, of course, his wife.”

“His wife,” I said.

“Yes, he had another wife but she die few years ago. He now just have one. Everyone want him to take another wife, but he say no. You must come to our village, Doc. It will be good.”

What remained was to talk to the hospital authorities and see whether they would agree. It would also mean extending my stay in Lubombo. Work should not be a problem. I had several weeks of leave due to me and there was no-one at home to answer to. Suddenly a mist of tears sprang to my eyes. No man, no partner to answer to, you mean, I said to myself. And, after many years the time with Samuel came back to me in vivid closeness. That sense of total involvement had never come again. My mind filtered the few relationships I had had since then, all of them shadows rather than substance. However, now I had met Gabriel and there was a connection between us. I definitely wanted to be home for the eclipse watching. But, I had only met him once and I certainly didn’t want to rush things. So why not, why not do something adventurous for a change. Marissa would jump at the chance without any second thoughts. Suddenly I wanted so badly to talk to my sister. Padding down the veranda I made my way to the small hospital exchange. The door was closed and I knocked. There was no reply.

It was ten o'clock at night. Perhaps they closed down for the night. As I turned to leave, the door opened and a sleepy faced woman peered out.

"I need to make a call to Cape Town," I said.

She looked at me bemusedly. "I need..." I hadn't thought that she might not speak English.

Holding her hand up, she ducked inside and a minute later emerged with an equally sleepy young man. I repeated the request.

"You are the doctor from Cape Town?" he said.

"Yes, I am Dr Brown."

"Superintendent has to authorise all calls out of the country." My heart sank. "But tonight for you I do it. Remember in the morning to ask superintendent."

A few minutes later Marissa's voice came on the line, a little crackly but warm and familiar. "Lena, how are you? Gosh, I've been dying to hear from you. What's it like there? Hot as hell, I'm sure." I filled her in on the interviews, the dead-ends, Vusi's suggestion about meeting the chief and finally Kingston's proposal.

"So do you think I should do it?" I ventured.

"Of course you should do it," Marissa's voice floated back. "I'll never speak to you again if you don't. Such an opportunity to do something different, something exciting. You need to get away from staring down microscopes at your bug plates."

"They're not bugs I look at," I said fondly, "they're chromosomes."

"Whatever! Just do it. Remember how you loved going to visit Sipiwe. Think of it like that. By the way, is he cute?"

"Who?" I asked.

"The chief."

"Marissa, you will never change," I laughed. "No, he's not like that. He's more wise and spiritual."

"Like a priest?"

"No, not like that." I struggled to identify the thought that was forming. "More like he knows the land and the people like he knows his own mind." And so my mind was made up and the rest was easy.

10.

When Ulysses drove me down to the village with my luggage, it felt surreal after that first trip from the airport to the hospital. This time he felt like an old friend and once again I was going off into the unknown. I had seen Ulysses several times in the hospital but never in a way that we could continue with that first conversation we had had. Still, he was familiar and I asked him if he knew the Chief.

“Ingovozana, he’s a good man,” he said. “Strange bloke though. Well educated. Could have been in government, minister of health or s’thing like that. But no, he wants to stay here. With his people, he says. I hope he can help you find out what you need to know.”

He deposited me with my suitcase in the gravel yard with the chickens flapping around me. The house was bigger than it had appeared the first time. There was a large section at the back which was hidden and this had a small guest suite with a comfortable bedroom and bathroom. Kingston met me at the door to his house and introduced me to a small smiling woman beside him, his wife, Nala. I was swept along by two excited teenagers who wanted to show me my room, and then to see my clothes and play with my hair until their mother dragged them away.

When I had settled in, I found Kingston in his study. He rose as I came in. “Lena, I have given much thought to this time you have here. And I am not sure if I have done the right thing. You cannot understand our whole culture in a few weeks, maybe not even in a few years and I don’t know whether so little time will give you the wrong idea. I worry about this.”

I looked at the picture on the wall of the king in traditional dress and wondered too whether it would be possible to absorb all the different facets of this culture. I thought of my childhood friend, Mtute, and how we had played together in a time when any differences between us had seemed like adventures to be explored. I had heard that he had been killed a few years ago in an accident on the farm.

Turning back to Kingston, I said: "I think I want to understand the idea of bewitchment and how this fits into the thoughts of your people on illness. It is probably the thing that conflicts most with my ideas of health."

"All right, that is good, so let's concentrate on one concept." He curled his fingers round the *knobkierie*. "There is no reason for you not to understand about bewitchment. There is no conflict, any more than praying for someone who is ill should conflict with your medical treatment of the person."

"Yes," I said, "but the praying does not stop the person from having medical treatment."

"And neither does *amafufunyana*. The men you have seen are all on treatment for their fits, are they not?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure that they believe in it."

Kingston smiled. "We all believe in myths, hmm."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"We are not all science. We are people with stories and fantasies and irrational beliefs and fears. And these cannot all be explained by facts and reason. So we make up stories to help us understand or to help us survive."

He threw his head back and laughed at my puzzlement. "There is a very special event I want to show you. It takes place next week. But first I want you to live with us and see how things work in our community, to help you understand *ubuntu*."

"I know about *ubuntu*, Kingston. This is not news to anyone anymore. Before Mandela maybe, but now everyone knows about living for each other and co-operating with each other."

"You may know the meaning of the word, but I wonder if you have really experienced it. Here," He tapped his chest twice. "In your heart." His hand remained at his chest as he continued. "I may be wrong, but I think your world is one of – what is the word they use – self-actualisation, the individual above all else, no? And everyone else comes after."

"Okay, I'm game to find out more, but tell me, Kingston, do you think that this will help me find the cause for the illness in your men?"

"I don't know that it will help you find the cause, but it will help you understand their experience of what happens. And you may understand why the actual cause does not matter."

"How can it not matter?" I exclaimed.

"Because, in the end, to each man it is a different thing. How he is with his family, with his friends, in his work, in each part of his life that is affected by the illness, is different. And each man has to cope with all these things in his own way. That is what is important for him, not what has caused it."

"But if we know what has caused it, we could have a treatment or a cure."

"Perhaps, or perhaps not. You think it is genetic. Is there a cure for this?"

"Well, no, but there could be ways of controlling it."

"And so each man has to find ways of controlling his misfortunes, or living with them. Illness or not."

After Kingston had left to keep an appointment, I thought about what he had said. In a way he was right. We all had to deal with our own circumstances, but medical treatment could surely make this easier for people. I thought of this often in the next few days as he showed me the village community. I met several of the men whom I had interviewed. Some were home for a weekend and pleased to spend time with their families. Many gathered for informal *braais*.

On the second night of my stay Kingston took me to a gathering where the whole village seemed to have assembled. I asked what the occasion was. "No occasion," he replied. "Just some people who decided to get together." Everyone had brought some food – meat, potatoes, mealies, bread, beer. A fire was lit in a deep drum and a grid was placed across it. Meat was grilled on the grid while at the same time a pot was placed on a second grid and mealies were ground and mixed into a bread loaf. Beer brewed in tin cans was passed around and soon singing and dancing broke out. Vusi was there too and he pulled me across to meet his family, including the cousin who was to be married. A man who had clearly had too much to drink fell

and twisted his ankle and immediately three or four young men picked him up on their shoulders and carried him to his house.

Kingston and Nala danced to the drum music in the background and the hot night air floated with the scent of jacaranda and smoke and meat. Sparks from the fire spattered in the breeze. The clearing vibrated with sound. A sense of happiness streamed through the place. As the night lengthened and the party continued, Kingston came to me. His colourful shirt was lit up by the firelight. "Would you like to go back now? It is getting quite late." Part of me wanted to remain in this lively atmosphere, but I agreed.

"Do you feel it?" he asked.

"*Ubuntu*? Yes, but everyone here knows everyone else very well."

"You are right. But no one person will trample on another. And if one is injured, all are injured. Even if you were injured, they would all come to help you."

"Isn't that more reason to solve this problem so that the whole community can be at peace?" I asked.

His lips curled in a small pout. "You have a point. Perhaps acceptance is too strong in my people."

I became familiar with the routines of the village, the slow paced chores of the women, the slapping sound of clothes being washed, the shrieks of chickens being chased and fed and the ebb and flow of the men to and from their work. Vusi's cousin's wedding was like the impromptu party but on a bigger scale. Not only was the whole village there but also many people from outside the village. Two busloads arrived on the morning of the wedding just as the slaughtered beasts were being brought in to be put on the spit. Some of the wedding guests pitched in to help and, when the bridal couple arrived from the ceremony, pitchers of wine were handed round along with the food. Dancing went on until late in the night.

The special event that Kingston had referred to drew nearer and he would not tell me what it was, other than that I should rest as we might be up late into the night.

11.

There were usually two cars parked outside Kingston's house. One was an old twin cab *bakkie* and the other a faded red Datsun. But tonight we were using neither. He had told me to bring warm clothes, though the day's heat still seeped through into the evening. All day there had been an air of excitement in the village. Although I had got to know some of the people, language was still an issue, so I could not ask what was going on. Annie and I had become quite friendly. The day after her startling revelation about Makhosini, she had come to see me on her own. Makhosini, she had said, was too embarrassed and upset to come and talk to me. She had forgiven him, she said, but inside her she still held a fear that it might happen again one day out of the blue as it had this time.

"Please find a cure for this, Lena," she had begged.

"Do you think this affects many of the men or do most of them just have the fits?" I asked.

"Most just have fits, but some go mad," she said.

When I was staying in the village she sought me out and took me to her and Makhosini's home, a small, neat house with hand sewn blue striped curtains and a dark wood mantelpiece filled with family photos. Many of them had laughing children and proud young parents.

"Who are these?" I asked.

"This is my oldest sister. She has four children. And this is my younger brother, he has three and these are all my cousins." Her voice clouded with sadness as she said: "I so wish that Mak and I could have a child."

"Have you tried seeing a doctor?" I asked.

"I have seen the doctor. He says he can find nothing wrong with me. Mak won't go. Our men do not believe that they are responsible for any problems with child bearing."

"So what happens if the man has a problem?"

"He goes to the *sangoma*. Maybe gets some herbs."

"Has Mak been to a *sangoma*?"

“I don’t know. I don’t think so, but it is not something we would speak about.”

“Your brother and sister and your cousins, are they in this village?”

“No, they are from Mbabane area. They are all out there.”

“I wish I could help you, Annie,” I sighed, “but you will both have to go for tests.”

She shrugged her shoulders in resignation. “Mostly, I just wish that I could have Mak back like he was. Now he is distant and scared.” These words stayed with me as I followed Annie around the village. She visited various people in her role as social worker, checking on children, providing food coupons to those with babies and no jobs, supporting women who had lost their husbands from HIV. We visited the homes of some of the men I had interviewed. Most of them still lived with their parents. Many had women but did not live with them. Some had more than one woman. This information I got from Annie and diligently recorded it. I noticed that few of them had children.

“They are still young,” Annie said when I asked her about this. “Or maybe the women are scared of the fits. They do not want to have children like this.”

Or maybe the condition makes them infertile, I thought in my head.

As we grew to know each other better, Annie started to ask about my life.

“Tell me about your job, Lena. What is it like working in a big hospital with all the equipment and lots of doctors?”

I thought about all the things we complained of – staff cuts, frozen posts, overcrowded wards and then I thought of Dr Marco battling his way singlehanded through the patients in Casualty.

“I work mostly in the genetics lab, Annie. I do research there but twice a week I do a clinic where I see all the children who were born with birth defects.”

“You have a social worker in this clinic?” she asked.

“Yes, and two nurses.”

“That is so good. And what about after work, Lena? Do you have a man in your life?”

“No man, Annie,” I smiled.

“Eh no, but why not?” she pulled her mouth back in dismay.

“I had a man long ago but it didn’t work out.”

She looked at me knowingly. “You still in love with him.”

Was I still in love with Samuel? I didn’t think so. I thought of him from time to time and sometimes the feeling of absolute trust and connection came back to me. When it did it overwhelmed me. Did I want that still? Or again? I let the thought patter round in my mind. That feeling of being completely understood, completely loved. Obviously that had been an illusion. Samuel had deceived me or I had deceived myself or was it something more complicated than either of these. Maybe we had been deceived by life.

It was a month of smoke and war and trapped words, that month when I laid my love beneath his feet. Marissa came home one day with unopened lunch sandwiches and holes in her thick black lisle school stockings. She still wore these in winter though she was in her first year at Varsity. She smacked her bag onto the kitchen table and told Ma that she was fed up. They are choking us, she said, by shoving the oppressor’s words into our throats and forcing us to spew them back. They have the army out on Campus at University of the North. The ARMY, can you believe it! We are all not going to lectures until this is stopped. Ma pulled her check housecoat closer to her body and looked at her daughter and did not know what to say.

She sat down on the chair where she always sat to peel the potatoes and took out two soup bowls. Slowly she ladled her newly made pea soup into the bowls for herself and Marissa. The soup was supposed to be for supper, but Ma thought she could speak better to Marissa if their tummies were warm. And also it was easier to speak over a dinner table. Easier to sip some soup, linger on the taste of the garlic and lemon and then slip gently into conversation.

“But Marissa, what is this about? If you skip lectures you won’t pass your exams, and then what will you do?”

“Ma, this is not about me. It’s about solidarity with the students in the north. Their campus is being occupied, like a damn war zone.”

Ma tried again. “But if you don’t go to class now, how will that help? You could lose your place at the university.”

“They have shot people, Ma, killed young students like me. How can the rest of us do nothing? How can their lives not be worth some protest?”

Ma sat quietly and sipped her soup and slowly her arms sank low into her waist.

Ma told me this when I got home from work. Dad was away on a course for the week, so I was all she had to share her marbled fears while we sat over the reheated soup and breathed the faint smell of burned sausages and oil. I listened but did not really hear. My head was full with his multi-layered words and the sweep of his eyes over my lips and the sensation of my skin prickling into life as he touched my hand. In the end I left her uncomfortable and ladled in her solitary despair. Pleading tiredness I went to bed though not to sleep.

Marissa in the bed beside me slept heroically posed on her back one arm stretched above her head, the other flung out wide across the sheets. While thunder crashed and rain clattered on the roof in this portentous winter my thoughts sauntered over the past weeks.

The night we met Casualty had been a war zone so that even the lab interns were called down to help. It looked like an unsheathed knife had flailed through the air, cutting through legs and chests and scalps and then a ghost held gun had finished off the job with shattered ribs and ragged holes in skulls. Both of us clothed in blue absorbent gowns and sweating masks, we patched and stitched and rejoined limbs amidst the sickly smell of fresh blood and the fetid odour of old clothes and day old alcohol breaths and open wounds.

And when that night had passed we sat, warm coffee cups in our hands, unable to leave and knew that the strangers we were last night were not the people we were today.

Tunnelled in adrenalin soaked exhaustion and newly bonded desire we finally left the sad hospital lights behind to find our individual beds, me to my room with Marissa, and Samuel Cremer, newly met, to his hospital flat as yet unknown to me. Those next days and nights fashioned themselves into a new world. Between the screeching beeps of his ECG machines and black silk sutures and my petrie dishes and flagellated bacilli we sat in his kitchen drinking endless cups of coffee from pale blue mugs – and there we learnt each other's lives.

I hadn't thought of Samuel for a long time, but now I remembered the fascination of being trusted with intimate details of his life and his thoughts. The fascination of feeling special and unique and having a place that no-one else had. How he had seemed to draw the thoughts from my mind. And how, one night they had all tumbled out, the unruly rush of thoughts of fears of hopes of dreams. We spoke of Sartre and Einstein and Rumi and Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf and yes, of Eugène Marais and J.M. Coetzee and John Vorster and Mandela, and language and love and tennis and fireflies. And when the torrent of words was in full stream overflowing its banks, when our thoughts and minds were one, he leaned towards me and caught a half uttered word with his lip and rolled its substance in the warm thickness of his tongue and stroked it with the honeyed wisps of his breath.

That month of smoke and war then passed me by as I lay dazed beside Marissa, who sat curled up with her arms around her knees perusing me as though I were a newly discovered creature.

"So what does he look like?" she asked.

"He is beautiful."

She sighed an exasperated sigh.

"Oh, he is tall and slim. His fingers float like spiders weaving webs when he works. And his eyes have all the colours of the sea."

"And what do you do together?"

“We talk and talk and learn each other.”

“Does he take you out? Do you walk through town and swim together and watch new films?”

“Now where would we go to do those things, Marissa?” I tossed my head crossly.

But we did walk through town. One day, leaving the castled turrets of the hospital behind, we walked down beside the beach, past the lighthouse and up to the Main Road shops of Sea Point. It was a rainy day and we weaved between umbrella’d women struggling on their high heels against the wind, bedraggled beggars on leaf-sodden street corners and mothers drawing shawls across the hoods of their prams. His thumb stroked mine with careless caresses and we stopped, rain-soaked, at a café to buy styrofoam cups of boiled brown water.

“I’ll have an ice-cream,” I said.

“In this cold and rain?” He smiled.

“Is it cold?” I laughed as I licked the white chocolate cream and he bent and kissed the coldness with warm lips.

“I have a friend who lives in that building,” he said as we walked finally back past the lighthouse.

“Oh, when will I meet your friends?” I asked.

“When we are tired of spending all our time alone together.” And we went back to his flat, now familiar to me as my own. And I drowned again in the smoky taste of his mouth and the play of his hands on my neck, slipping like water droplets down, down the length of my waist the slope of my belly and stopping, as always, just short of heaven.

The first dark butterfly fluttered across my sky the day before Marissa announced her protest. It hatched as she sat beside me telling me in anger how ten soldiers with green-gray uniforms had screeched up to the locked school gates where she and two hundred school children stood in silent prayer outside the school building where she was helping as a student teacher while she was not at Varsity. Marissa stood in the front row with ten others. Behind them, perfect rows of still, silent scholars, heads bowed, and at their head one white cloth on wooden poles with words in ink-black –

FREE OUR SCHOOLS AND CAMPUSES. She trembled as she told me how the men crouched down beside the locked gate, assault rifles cocked. One was pointed straight at her and she saw the stubble on the young man's cheek, the peaked cap pulled low over his forehead and the finger tight on the trigger, and then she saw his eyes this man she didn't know staring at her full of hate. He shot the lock off the gate and they spilled through, the horde of armed men to fight the schoolchildren standing defiantly in silence.

It was then she said that fear transformed to anger like lead to gold. The headmaster, Basil Young, suited dignified philosopher and mentor, walked towards the men and said in measured tones: "We are going to stand here for half an hour, that is all, then we will disperse."

"Fok, wie is jy? Jou bosluis." They pulled him to his knees, chips of tar tearing at his trousers and pushed his head against the ground. They held a gun to his ear and shouted: "Sestig sekondes, as daar nog een persoon hier is, skiet ons."

In the breath-held silence, Mr Young's voice was the only sound heard. "Students disperse now, quietly and quickly."

"So cheer me up," said Marissa, "help me forget this anger inside me and tell me about your great love. How does it feel when he touches you?"

So I told her about the wined lips upon my throat, of the roasting warmth of his hands along my spine and the slant of his knee against my leg.

"And then?" she said

"And that's it."

"He stops?"

"He always stops."

"But why? Do you stop him?"

"No, he stops because he respects me."

"Ach, nonsense, that's what Ma says, but that's not how it is anymore."

That was when the butterfly of doubt appeared. So the next time I saw Samuel, though he read my mind as before and though we spoke of poets and philosophers as before and though I felt our minds were melded as

before, some part of me sat on the ceiling of the room and watched him caress me. And I saw a distance that I hadn't seen before. And then the butterflies multiplied and suddenly they were flapping loudly inside my head bumping into my thoughts and jostling them. I phoned and he wasn't home and when I asked him what he had done last night he said he'd been home all night preparing a tutorial. I saw him in the corridor talking on the phone, hands conveying urgency, and when he saw me he turned away and lowered his voice. One day when we were supposed to meet at five, after work, he was half an hour late and told me he was caught in traffic, but his eyes avoided mine.

So that is when I followed him one afternoon when I said I needed to sleep. I followed him along the line of waves to that apartment by the lighthouse. Saw the door open to a man who pulled him inside in a rush of claspings arms and mouths and beards. And then I could not stand anymore. I sat on the low wall along the sand and turned my head from the road. The sand was blue with shells. Grey-blue like roof slate. Like the roof of his apartment. There was a woman on the beach. She wore a straw hat and had a fine rake in her hand.

"Are you all right?" she said.

I nodded. I felt the air rushing through my head like a cloud. She must see that. "What are you doing?" I asked in a voice that was not mine but seemed to come from above me, swaddled in clouds.

"I am sifting shells," she said, "for a Science project for my daughter. She needs to sort them into sizes and families, and then see if they can be classified."

"Where is your daughter?"

The light seemed to fade a little from her eyes. "She is on the Grand Parade protesting with the school children. If I do this for her, she may still catch up with the work she has missed."

I watched the woman walking slowly down the beach, slivers of blue shell in the teeth of the rake.

After a long while, I turned and watched the window of the apartment where I knew he was, but the curtains were drawn and did not move. I got

up and began to walk. I walked down the Beach Road, all the way along Somerset Road, past the Prestwich monument and down Bree into Shortmarket Street. I did not feel my feet against the road. My mantra was to find my sister, Marissa, heroic and endangered. I could not bring myself to think of him, Samuel Cremer, and the apartment where he lay cavered with his love, where he lay and betrayed me.

There was a whirling in the air and a noise of sirens and water hoses. And the air hung thick with smoke. A crowd surrounded me and flowed on, running individuals in box pleat skirts and grey trousers and blazers with badges. I walked on past the City Hall and crossed the road. I didn't feel the sting of the rubber bullet against my shoulder. Waves of tear gas clogged my lungs and salted my eyes. Marissa was not there and I knew then that my sister, despite her passion, would not let herself be trampled or defeated.

I retraced my steps till I was once again by the sea and the lighthouse watching the drawn curtain. So that is how, when he lifted the curtain aside planning I am sure to look out at the sea in a carnal haze, he met my eyes and knew that I knew. And knew what we both had lost.

I snapped back to the present as Annie came into the room from the kitchen with a small tray on which was a teapot and two flower patterned mugs. She poured sweet smelling tea for me and handed me the steaming mug.

The day of the special event arrived. When Kingston appeared at the doorway of the house he was dressed in full traditional costume. I gaped at him, awe-struck. He wore a dark printed *lihiya* like a skirt around his waist and, knotted over his right shoulder was a red *umhelwane*. A pointed animal hide hung over the *lihaya*. His long legs ended in sandals. A collar of teased out cattle tails lay at his neck and his hair was plastered back with some type of soap or clay, so that it resembled blue marble and a single quill pierced the hair just above a headband of leopard skin. The white fur cuffs were round his wrists and ankles and he carried the well worn *knobkierie* with the sideways knob in one hand. His chin jutted out and his arms were

pulled back on either side, once again giving the impression of an eagle. I had become familiar with the tribal dress and the names of the types of clothing, but had never seen anything so elaborate. There was also something primal about seeing him like this.

He nodded to me and inclined his head, gesturing for us to move round the side of the house. "Good evening, Lena. Are you ready to explore?"

At the side of the house a horse and cart had been hooked up. The horse was tied to a pole and stood patiently, occasionally pawing the grounds as some fowls ventured too close. He leapt lightly onto the back of the cart and held out a hand to help me up.

"We need a different form of transport for tonight. You will see why," he smiled.

"Won't you tell me what this occasion is?" I asked.

"You will soon see," he murmured as he set the horse off on its track.

We headed out through some dense shrubbery at the back of Ingovozana's house as I pondered his words. What were we going to explore?

It was cold now in the back of the cart and the horse trotted slowly between the tress, its hooves sinking into the soft soil. We passed through a patch of high shrubs so close together that the leaves beat against my face. They had retained the heat of the day. They felt smooth and leathery with a slight sting as they touched me. The horse snorted and threw back its head slightly as a frog jumped across its path, barely visible in the dark. Ingovazana calmed it with a soft word. Cicadas sang in the silence and a patch of midges intersected our path.

The horse trotted on in silence and, just as I was about to speak, its feet sank into marshy sand and a river came into view. A sudden memory from my childhood flashed through my mind. Of Sibongile, Mtute and me crouching by a river watching out for a man whom they believed would bring together the heaven and earth. And we had watched the river turn red and seen my grandfather and the glow-worms and the patches of light falling into the dry river bed. I felt light headed from this old memory and how it made me feel the next day when it rained. The start of my tension between

science and non-scientific explanations of the world. And now, here we were, back in this ancient time frame, reliving it.

Ingovozana pulled the horse to a stop and motioned for me to get down from the cart. It was a strange feeling being in an unknown place in the darkness with this man whom I had only met less than two weeks ago. The full moon cast an eerie light over the dark landscape, and yet I did not feel afraid. All I felt was a sense of anticipation.

As I stepped down, the long grass tickled my bare legs and I could feel the crawl of ants over my open toed sandals. Reeds rustled in the slight breeze, making a silken tinkling sound, like a stick tapping on a half full water glass. Ingovazana lit a match and the quick harsh sound was followed by the sharp sulphur smell, crisp and strong in the full night air. It lit our way to an old tree with seedpods where its fruit grew.

“Marula tree,” Ingovozana said. “Let us sit down on these stumps. He pointed to two knee high tree stumps which were broad and firm. One of them had a backing of bark which angled upwards like a back rest. I sat down and the tree stump felt warm. The air smelt of fresh grass and old smoke and trampled fruit. From here the moon lit the river almost as bright as daylight.

“I want you to look at the sky,” Ingovozana said, his arm pointing forwards and upwards. “Like a dome of blue rock resting on the earth, in which the sun plays,” he murmured. “Our neighbours think the stars are holes in the rocky vault of the sky,” he continued.

I wondered if he was quoting from somewhere, the words sounded so lyrical. The sky was dark with pinpoints of light scattered across it. I looked instinctively for Orion’s belt. My eyes found the three linear stars of the belt and the slightly dimmer stars of the sword of the hunter, with the bulky body surrounding it. He followed my gaze.

“You are looking at the hunter? Do you know his story?”

I shook my head as a grass snake flitted through the reeds, making me jump.

Ingovozana gripped my arm briefly. “Don’t worry it is safe,” he said, and I slowly relaxed and let the beauty of the scene unfold before me. The cool

night air, the shimmering river, the sculptured tree stumps on which we sat, the oily aquamarine sky with its bright flickering stars and the white cloudy sweep of the Milky Way.

He seemed to read my thoughts. "Or maybe I should tell you the story of the Milky Way. Once long ago there was a young girl who was sitting with her lover at the campfire outside their hut. They had just finished their meal and she was hoping for some quiet time with him. The man, however, wanted to go hunting. She tried to persuade him to stay, but his mind was set on the hunt. As he walked off into the bush, she thrust her hand in anger into the embers of the campfire, took a handful of the burning coals and flung them up into the sky. They floated upwards and reached the heavens where they became the Milky Way. There were also the remains of some roots that they had been eating for their meal and the red roots became red stars, while the white roots became white stars. And so the Milky Way was formed. As it happened the man was caught in the dark and got lost in the bush. When he looked up at the sky, he saw the cloudy curtain sweeping in one direction, and the stars which lit his way. He followed this tail of stars and found his way home. The girl's anger had been of use in saving his life and also remains beautiful in the night sky. In cities where the artificial lights are strong, the Milky Way can hardly be seen anymore and its magic is lost." He stopped and smiled.

"It is a beautiful story," I said, mesmerised by his voice.

"Of course, one could take this story and talk of the girl's burnt hands and how she would have found treatment for them in the middle of the night with no transport, but that would be a different story. A story like that would last a few days only, while the one I have told you will last forever. And then there is the story about how the girl would cope with burnt hands and pain on her own in the night when her lover had just walked away from her. And that again would be a different story which would last for longer in the girl's life. So which is the real truth of the story? Which is your truth, Lena?"

The river flowed smoothly, lapping against its banks and gurgling over small hidden rocks. Before I could reply, he said: "But look, it is starting.

What I wanted to show you.” He pointed at the moon. A bright full moon hung amidst the stars, fat and opulent. “See the small scallop on the edge of the moon.” As I watched the dark bite in the moon grew slowly, until it swayed in darkness, its bright whiteness almost overtaken by a magician’s cloak of blackness. I shivered slightly at the strange sight. The cicadas seemed to have stilled and I wondered if they could sense it too. The river, brightly lit by the moon, was now a black pit.

Beside me, Ingovozana asked: “Have you ever watched an eclipse of the moon before?” His disembodied voice hung in the cloying air.

“No,” I said, shivering again.

“You feel the strangeness,” he remarked. “You can understand then how all the myths about eclipses arose.” As the moon disappeared behind the dark menace of the earth I listened to Ingovozana’s stories of the stars and how they were used to predict fertile times for planting crops, of the Horn star which was the brightest in the Southern sky and of the fears when the sky went dark like tonight. All I could see now was a small wedge with some grey spots on it. The darkness of the sky was impressive. The Milky Way had disappeared and only a few faint stars were visible in the sky. Suddenly the moon reappeared in full size as though it had been under an invisible cloak which had been lifted. But now it was red, a bright coppery red in the centre with the edges more ruddy and a bluish, very bright rim around its circumference.

Ingovozana’s voice echoed in the still night air, rich and gravelly: “The Sun and the Moon merge. The Moon takes on the colour of the Sun. They change roles. For a few minutes, the Sun shines in the night. Surely this changes the world?”

“Another myth,” I said.

“It is the myths which make us human. If you can understand this, Lena, then you can just begin to understand my people. What we are, what we believe, what we cherish and what we will die for.” The red orb swayed above us and then the sweep of black smoke began to cover it from the opposite direction. When it had dispersed, the moon gleamed in brilliant white again. I thought of the centuries and centuries of the same myths, the

same ceremonies, the same rituals. That layer of the imagination which stokes our fears, prompts the narratives we invent to soothe them and helps us to explain an uncertain and unpredictable world.

“Come, Lena, Let’s go back home.”

The rolling motion of the horse and cart was surreal in the landscape now returned to normal. We did not speak. When we arrived back at the house and Ingovozana helped me down and unhitched the horse, I found that my head seemed to be ringing with thoughts.

All I could say was: “That was unbelievably beautiful.”

He laughed. “Good.”

“But I still need to understand about *amafufunyana*.”

“There will be time. Let this be enough for tonight.”

He walked ahead of me into the house. “Sleep well, Lena.”

12.

When I walked into the front of the house the next morning, Nala and her younger daughter were finishing their breakfast. Nala smiled shyly at me. Her English was not as good as Kingston’s. She was dressed in a dark blue print dress with a matching tie round her head. The daughter was smartly dressed in a bright dress with shiny black shoes.

“Good morning,” Nala bowed her head slightly in greeting. “You will eat something?” I took some fruit from the bowl. “You had good time last night?” she asked.

I wondered what her thoughts on the eclipse were but didn’t know how to ask.

The young girl, Thandi, whom I had heard was thirteen years old, came and took my hand. “Will you come with us? We are going to Papa’s grave.” I looked across at her mother in puzzlement.

“We are going to the grave of my husband’s father.” Nala explained. “It is the time for talking to him. You come with us. Ingovozana thinks you will find it interesting.”

The cemetery was on the outskirts of the town. It was unfenced and untended tree roots grew over the sandy paths. Many headstones lay at oblique angles, knocked over by wind or storms and never repaired. It didn't seem that graveyards were a big focus here. When I asked about this, Nala answered: "The ancestors are with us in the world. The graves must return to the earth. It is not worth spending money on them. It is only a meeting place where we can come to talk with them."

I asked what the significance of this day was and why she was coming to talk to her ancestors now.

"Thandi and I we come to tidy up. Last night was the big night of the sun and the moon. Also our men saw the horn star. It is time for good fortune for our crops and for lots of babies for the cattle. Last night, Ingovozana and two of the elders they come here to talk and to bring food. Like a gift. While you were out giving praise to the sun and the moon, the other elders were at the crossroads, collecting forest mushrooms. They bring to the grave the mushrooms and mealies and marula wine."

I wondered briefly at this. Ingovozana must have gone out again after we had returned home. I hadn't seen any praising of the moon though as Nala had suggested. She pointed to a small patch on the grave where the soil looked like it had been dug over.

"See, there is the hole they made to put the food and wine in. We must check that food was not stolen and we talk again to the old ones."

She and Thandi knelt down and carefully, with their fingers, dug down into the hole. I saw a small package which appeared to be wrapped in a white waxy paper. Nala felt around the paper gently and nodded her head in satisfaction. Then she felt to the side of the parcel and her fingers came up against a small pot. She tinkled her fingers against it to hear if there was any liquid within. Directing Thandi to cover up the hole, she turned to me and said: "All is good." Then she dropped down on her knees and slowly prostrated her whole body over the grave, her hands stretched out above her head. I saw that there were rows of bangles on her arms in an array of different colours. She rose and fell down again. After the third time, she began to chant. The words were high pitched and rose above the noise of

the leaves shuddering on the trees in the wind. I did not understand them, but they did not sound like the prayer I was familiar with. More like a loud conversation. At times an almost angry monologue.

I felt Thandi's hand in mine and she whispered: "Because she is the wife of a great chief, she is allowed to talk to the old ones. Otherwise women not allowed to do this."

"What is she saying?" I asked.

"Oh, she is just talking." She listened for a minute and then translated. "You, Great Chief, your young ones are ill. We do not know why, we do not know who is responsible. If it is you, if you are angry, we ask for forgiveness. If we have done wrong, pardon us. Other lineages are prospering but not our people. Why are you doing this? Why do you not look after us properly?"

"Who is she referring to?" I asked.

"She means the sick men in the village."

"But, your father..." I stopped. "Your father didn't think that there was a problem." And then it dawned on me. He didn't think that the problem was medical or that it could be solved by Western medicine. Did he believe that it was brought about by the ancestors? Like a curse? Ingovozana had struck me as an unusual man from the first time I had met him, but I had constructed him in my own terms. He only spoke English to me, he had medical training, he could debate with me in the way that I was accustomed and, though some of the concepts he had introduced me to were foreign they seemed to be ideas that were wise and far thinking. Ideas that I could relate to. But this! This was bizarre, this talking to dead people as though they were still alive and could control what happened in their offspring. This was not something I could accept.

Nala had risen to her feet and collected her things together, brushing the soil smooth for the last time and then we walked home.

Ingovozana was busy with interviews all day. I went in search of Annie but she was out. Vusi was at the hospital and I wondered briefly if I should walk over there but the long walk in the heat seemed too much. I felt

restless and ill at ease. My earlier views of Kingston as wise and spiritual felt foolish. Suddenly I wanted to be back home. I looked up at the sky but it was day time, so I could not see Orion's belt to ground myself. And I thought of Gabriel, of his teasing repartee, of his hand gently at my elbow, of his desire to see me again and I wanted desperately to be with him.

Finally, in the late afternoon, it seemed that Ingovozana was free. I knocked on the door to his study.

"Lena," he smiled as he opened the door and went to sit down on his favourite chair, gesturing for me to sit down beside him. Fading sunlight sifted through the open window, picking out the shades of the zebra skin on the floor. The room seemed to dance with light and shadows. "Did you go to the graveyard with my wife and daughter?"

"Yes I did. I believe that you were there last night after the eclipse."

He inclined his head. "It was an important night." He lifted a hand to his cheek to brush away a fly, seeming to lose himself for a moment in thought.

"Because you believe that the eclipse was an omen?" I could not keep the accusatory tone from my voice.

"Because I believe that the rituals and ceremonies of my people are important," he replied.

"And last night was a reason for a ceremony?" I asked, clasping my hands together nervously. I wanted to get up and walk around the room to rid myself of the unsettled feeling inside me, but I remained seated.

"Yes, it was the first sighting of the Horn star for the season. That suggests that the time is right to start crop planting."

"But you took gifts to the grave of your father."

"And do you not take flowers to the grave of your father, Lena? Or your grandfather?"

"I don't think it's quite the same thing." I said.

"You are right," Ingovozana said. "Let's not beat about the bush. You are wanting to ask me about the ancestors."

"Yes," I said. "When I was there with Nala and Thandi, I saw the food and wine you had left at the grave and I heard Nala speak to them as

though they were still alive. Do you believe in ancestor worship, Kingston? Do you believe that your dead father can cause illness or lay curses or cure them?”

The question hung between us like a spider which had suddenly slid down a thread from its web and appeared in full view. Kingston had his long fingers cupped under his chin and he looked out through the open window for a long while. Finally he turned to me.

“I am trying to think of a way to help you understand,” he said. “I believe in the importance of rituals. I especially believe in the importance of rituals which bind a community together. The details are less important.”

“Tell me about *amafufunyana*,” I said, my voice sticking in my throat.

“All right, but first I must tell you something else. In your world, I see more and more how each single person comes to be most important to himself. If a person is most important to himself then some other person will suffer by being less important. And so people fight and loot and plunder because everyone wants to be important for himself. Are you with me?”

I nodded impatiently. What did this have to do with bewitchment? He continued: “But each individual person can only be one thing – a farmer, a king, a father, a thief, a servant; he cannot be all.”

“But a man can be a farmer, a husband and a thief all at the same time,” I interrupted.

“Yes, but he cannot be everything all at the same time. Each man is merely a piece of the whole. From his group he has derived the language in which he thinks, the ideas on which he builds his values. And from the past of that society descended the genes that built his body.”

“Okay, so that is the concept of *ubuntu*. A man is a man through other men. You’ve explained that to me.”

Kingston held up his hand. “Let me finish,” he said sternly. “I was talking about the past of a society and the beginnings of its existence. It is these threads that make the whole society visible to itself as a unit. Individual generations come and go but they also stay with us. They form us and guide us and keep the old traditions alive. Maybe a little like your

people may believe in angels,” he said as I looked sceptical. “Aren’t they guides which help people to find where they need to go?”

“Mostly people don’t believe in angels these days, Kingston,” I said, “and many don’t believe in a God. They believe that each man is responsible for his own destiny.” He inclined his head again. “Anyway, believing in guardian angels is not the same as believing in witchcraft.”

“Ah, *amafufunyana*. Finally we are there. But I wonder if you are ready to hear this, Lena.”

“Why?” I must have raised my eyebrows.

“You are so angry and caught up in your own illusions. Can you bear to hear someone else’s?”

When I kept silent, he continued. “*Amafufunyana* means that a person has been invaded and taken over by evil spirits as a result of witchcraft. The person who performs the bewitchment usually takes ants which have been feeding on the graves of dead people and crushes them, making up a mixture which is secretly given to the chosen person. The bewitched person usually talks of voices coming from their stomach, talking in a different language and telling them to do things.”

“Like the boy who killed the family?” I said softly. “Do you believe that he was bewitched?”

“Perhaps,” he said, “What does it matter what I believe? It is done.”

“But it could have been prevented,” I said.

“How?”

“If his symptoms were detected earlier he could have been treated with anti-psychotic medication.”

He smiled. “So your belief is that he was mad?”

“Certainly.”

“And you would explain this... madness... how?”

“There are many possible reasons but in the end it would be due to a disorder of the chemicals in the brain which don’t function as they should.”

“And you would treat these chemicals by giving them more chemicals to make them work right?”

“Yes.”

“And you would lock the boy away?”

“Yes, so that he cannot do any more harm till he is treated.”

“Do you know where that boy is now?” Kingston asked, his face suddenly sad.

“I heard that he was in prison somewhere in the country.”

“Yes, he sits in a cell all day with his knees curled up to his chin and his arms wound tightly round them. He does not move, does not eat, does not speak.” Kingston got up and walked across to his desk, toying for a moment with a small brown stone paperweight.

“You remember the story I told you about my father?” he asked, turning his tall frame, the arms drawn back proudly. The majestic eagle. “This is the same. Your psychiatrists would extract some pieces of information from the person’s story, just enough to complete a diagnostic puzzle. Other aspects of the person are left out.”

“And what would you do then?”

“Here it is thought that sickness and suffering are manifestations of the body’s inner wisdom. The body is telling the person to stop and listen. It is an opportunity for self development. The ancestors are sending out a reminder.”

“And is this what you think happens to these people? To the man who raped his wife, or the one who broke his sister’s arm? Are they reaching new levels of self development?”

Ingovazana sighed. “Our village as a whole suffers from this, and we will grow stronger as a community and we will make it right.”

I got up and walked to the window. A group of guinea fowl prowled through the grass and a yellow butterfly flitted onto a nearby plant. I felt agitated and annoyed with myself. I had come to trust Ingovazana and to listen to his careful words, but now I felt let down.

His deep voice spoke from just behind me. “Lena, trust your own instincts. Our illusions are no better than yours. In time, you will come to decide for yourself what things are real and what are smoke screens. I am thankful that you have an interest in helping my people and what you do will help because that is your intention.”

The next day I went back to the hospital. I had spent two weeks in the village and now I was angry with myself. I still had twenty five men to interview and I wasn't sure that this time had helped at all. Vusi and I took up our familiar positions in the hot little room with the plastic chairs as if nothing had happened. Over the next week, I interviewed, examined, took blood samples, made notes and started constructing a data sheet of the information I had so far. I did not see Ingovazana before I left Lubombo.

The purple blossoms of the jacaranda, the pungent smell of cow dung and the rhythmic slapping of the women washing clothes hung in my mind at my departure. And I tried to push away memories of a star splattered night, a red moon over the water and Ingovazana's deep voice relating his tales.

CHAPTER 3

1.

I had been out of Cape Town for exactly a month. The cool night air as I stepped off the plane contrasted with the hot humid *bushveld* weather I had grown accustomed to. I was glad to be home. My thoughts now swung to Gabriel. A late night, a quick phone call and an exhausted sleep preceded this day when I would meet him again.

I parked my car up close to Rhodes memorial because this was the closest parking spot I could get. The wind was brisk as I walked down through the trees and then down the staccato flights of steps, winding their way down to University Avenue. The walk took about fifteen minutes, enough time to steep one in the university world. The old brown buildings covered in ivy looked as though they had been there for centuries. The steps of Jameson Hall were littered with students, going back for decades into history. I wondered about Gabriel's students. The wide grey slabs under my feet led up to Number 6, the Astronomy Building. I was meeting Gabriel there and then we would go to the Observatory together to watch the eclipse.

The corridors were narrow and little warrens of passages snaked off to the sides with lecture rooms opening out from them. Second floor, he had said. As I reached the top of the flight of stairs, I heard raised voices.

"You have no right to do that. I'll see that you pay for it." A man rushed round onto the stairs, nearly bumping into me. I registered that he seemed vaguely familiar as I heard Gabriel's voice calling after him.

"Oh, come on now." His frame appeared before me as I regained my balance and reached the top of the stairs.

"Oh... Lena," he said, his face slightly flushed. His hand rested on the cement tile at the top of the stairs. His hair was longer than when I'd left and curled into his neck. All the dreams and desires and memories of the last few weeks surged through my body.

"What was that about?" I asked, trying for casualness.

“Long story. Come on, there are more important things than Philip’s jealous tantrums.”

I remembered him now, the man who had been at the Planetarium and challenged him after the lecture. Now, as then, I sensed a pent up tension in Gabriel which he covered up expertly with a smile and a wave of his hand as he guided me into his office.

“How are you? I can’t wait to hear about your time away.” He took my hand in his and squeezed it briefly. Just give me a minute to get some papers together and we can head off to the Observatory.”

The office was unremarkable. It could have belonged to any university lecturer. Gabriel’s name was on the door on a thin white plastic plaque: *Professor Gabriel Powell. Senior lecturer.* The view from inside was onto some dirty steps running down to a small cement patio which looked like the dumping area for the building. Ubiquitous bird poops dotted the stairs with white. His desk was tidy with neat stacks of papers on one side and a jotter and year planner on the other. Two pictures on the wall; one of an old cathedral and one a diagrammatic representation of a solar system.

“So where does the real astronomy happen?” I asked, watching his precise movements round the office, as he gathered his papers into a briefcase.

“There’s a lab down the passage but most of it happens in the field. That’s where they collect the data, and then it’s brought back to be analysed by computer.”

“No telescopes here then?”

“No, but there’ll be plenty to see at the Observatory. Shall we go?”

The Observatory grounds adjoin those of the Valkenberg Mental Hospital. As we drove through the security gates of the Observatory, I thought of the hospital in Lubombo and their lack of mental health facilities. Today was the day when the moon was in control. In control even of the powerful sun. They speak of moon madness. If there was ever a time for this, it was now. A full moon covering the sun and blocking its light. No wonder people quaked at eclipses and foresaw all kinds of disasters. The world turned upside down. Not that this partial eclipse would be anything

like that. Today would be for looking at the sky through a telescope more powerful than any of the amateur ones I had seen. And it would be for Gabriel. As I got out of the car, I suddenly felt no desire to be stuck in a lecture theatre again. It was quarter to two. Everything had been well timed to proceed from the lecture straight to the watching area.

“Mind if I skip the lecture and just look around?” I asked.

“Help yourself. I have to go and help with the organisation inside. The viewing field is over there,” he pointed behind him, “through those two buildings. Shall I catch up with you later then?”

A few young men were standing next to a telescope, adjusting the lens. They looked up as I approached.

“You’re a bit early, Miss. Lecture’s about to start. It’ll be forty five minutes still before first contact.” A few metres away was a familiar figure – Mouse. He was bent over the front end of a telescope, screwing in a large lens which looked like a paparazzi camera.

“It’s all right. I know him,” I said, pointing.

Mouse looked up, his eyes hovering between the moment of concentration which had just occupied his attention and the few second thought transfer to recognising me. “Lena,” he smiled, his voice warm, “Gabriel’s in the lecture hall. They’ll all be along here in about an hour.”

“I didn’t feel like another lecture. Is it all right if I hang around here?”

“Sure, here’s some eye protectors,” he said, handing me a pair of cardboard glasses with darkened centres. “Would you believe, the last time I went to see an eclipse, the school teachers wouldn’t let the kids out cos they’d heard that looking at eclipses can cause eye damage.”

“You’ve seen a total eclipse?”

“I’ve seen two. Or one and a half, really. The first was in Australia. That was the conservative school teacher one. The second was in Mongolia, but the clouds came over just after first contact. We tried to move to a better spot, but the equipment’s so heavy that we didn’t make it. So I made do with seeing the earth darken, but no eclipse photo.”

“What’s that you’re doing there?”

“Well... I’m setting up to photograph the eclipse. You interested?”

“Sure.”

Mouse hooked his finger over a flat flap on the side of the telescope. “Big thing with astrophotography is that things happen slowly. So you need long time exposures. Also photographing over a prolonged time means that the object in the sky moves out of your field of vision. The telescope has to have a tracking mount – this thing here – to follow the object and keep it centred, else I’ll be filming from here to kingdom come and won’t catch anything.

“So is that what you do – photograph eclipses?” I asked.

“Not only eclipses. Stars, comets, transits.”

“Transits?”

“Yes. The transit of Venus, for example. When Venus passes in front of the Moon. People love seeing that one.”

“And you sell the pictures?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I’m commissioned by magazines like Astronomy. Sometimes TV stations are making documentaries. Sometimes the pictures are used by academics in their research.”

“So, Mouse. Why Mouse?”

He lifted his head and laughed up into the sky. “Enough of me. I thought it was Gabriel you were interested in.”

I felt a blush rise to my cheeks. “Who says I’m interested in him? We’ve just met and... and this was an opportunity to see an eclipse.”

“No need to get defensive.”

“How long have you known Gabriel?”

“We went to university together in Bristol. I left Glasgow looking for adventure and wound up in Bristol. I’d been travelling round the country for a while taking pictures of everything I saw. When I got to the south of England I heard of the Clifton Suspension bridge in Bristol – longest suspension bridge in the UK, strung across a gorge, so I wanted to have a look. It really is a stunning sight.”

I imagined Gabriel in the cold greyness of England with its austere old buildings.

“I’ll never forget – there I was with my rucksack on my back and my camera in my hand trudging across the bridge, pacing out a spot for a good picture and it was already darkening – four o’clock in British winter – and there was this guy on the bridge hanging over the ropes, on the side which they’ve cordoned off so you’re not supposed to go there. There’ve been a number of jumpers, you know. Suicides,” he added, seeing my blank look. “When I saw him I thought he was trying to jump. So I went right up to him and was reaching out to tug his jumper, when I saw the binoculars in his hand and the notebook by his feet. He was up on that bridge looking at some star. When he realised what I had been thinking, he jumped back over the railing, laughing and said that it seemed a good time for us both to go have a pint. That’s when I met Gabriel. We were twenty three years old.”

A few latecomers wandered across the field. The lecture was now well under way and they had missed the first part, so they crossed to the telescopes, yellow sun protectors in hand. The students were clearly flustered by the early arrivals and tried to get rid of them with helpful comments like: “You could go into the foyer of the auditorium where there’s a display on what an eclipse is and how to watch it safely.” When this met with little response they tried again: “There’s a great model of the SALT telescope there too. It shows all the details, even the eleven mirror array.” Finally, the older of the students, pointing to a little round building, said: “Or you could get a head start on the queue for the heliograph. The building’s really small so only a few will be able to get in to see it.” Pre-empting any lack of understanding, he continued, “The heliograph is used to project the image of the eclipsing sun onto a screen so that you can see the whole process quite clearly. If you get a front seat, you’ll be able to watch the whole eclipse.” This had the latecomers scuttling off and the student raised his eyebrows and mopped his brow in mock relief.

Mouse had finished setting up his equipment and two more people had arrived and were clustering round the telescopes, making what appeared to be final adjustments. He beckoned me over. “Lena, meet Richard and Graham. They are the astronomers who will be manning the telescopes and

talking people through the eclipse. Maybe you should stake your claim early.”

I followed Richard across the lawn to a large telescope on a mount which he told me was a solar telescope. The lens was covered with something that looked like tinfoil, but he assured me that it was a specially manufactured material that made it quite safe to look at the Sun.

Next to us, Graham had moved to a small squat device called a Sunspotter. “This is very simple. You can even make one yourself. I did when I was at school, used it to measure sunspots on a daily basis. The general idea of the design is that you want to have a surface that is parallel to the plane of the equator, and the scope rotates in this plane to 'undo' the rotation of the earth. This way you only have one knob to deal with as you are trying to keep the sun exactly on target. The big disk rides on a tilted surface, and you follow the sun by slowly turning the hand wheel on the right. The wheel turns the threaded rod, which moves to the left or right the little clamping piece that grabs the bottom of the disk, and thus rotates the disk. There is a counterpart clamping piece on the top of the disk, where a knob allows you to loosen the clamp, turn the disk for gross adjustment, and then re-clamp it. An image of the sun is projected onto a standard 3.5×5 index card, held by the cardholder.” He was obviously enthusiastic about his subject.

“Are you particularly interested in sunspots?” I asked.

“Actually the Sun in general. I am doing my PhD on holes in the Sun’s corona,” he said.

As I looked at all this sophisticated equipment, I thought back to that night not so long ago when I had sat on a tree stump in the darkness watching the moon turn red and listening to Kingston telling his stories of the Horn star and the girl with burnt hands. Then, I had still been captivated by his wise words. Why could I not accept the rest?

Graham’s voice broke through these thoughts. “They’ll all be coming out quite soon. We are five minutes from first contact.”

The sky was blue. There were a few clouds. The distant white buildings and the domes of the Observatory looked like a moonscape. The skin on my

arms tingled. It would be almost two hours before the full extent of the eclipse was visible. This was a slow process. Almost like fishing with my father, sitting silently, rod in hand, waiting for the bite which might take hours to come or might not come at all. At least this would definitely happen. I realised that the tingling was more from the thought of two hours with Gabriel. What was it about this man that had started to fascinate me? The crowds were out of the auditorium now. About fifty people, turning around the corner of the small building with the helioscope, some stopping to get in line there, others marching determinedly across the lawn to the telescopes. I didn't see Gabriel. Should I attach myself to Richard or Graham's telescope? Should I wait?

"First contact," Graham shouted. The crowd around the Sunspotter drew closer as the first tentative touching of the rim of the moon against the Sun's surface appeared on the screen. Unexpected clouds drifted across the Sun at that moment. But this was a slow process and they would move away again. I glanced across at the corner of the building leading to the auditorium, but there was no sign of Gabriel. Mouse had his head against the lens, lining up his photographs. The world seemed to skid into slow motion. Looking through the sun viewer the great disc appeared white and a small mouse bite of black appeared in its upper corner. A black Moon and a white Sun. How strange. And yet how ordinary. No great changes in anything on the ground. Birds in the trees continued to sing.

The people round the telescopes spoke in low tones asking the occasional question and the astronomers talked them through eclipses, safety glasses, the sun and solar flares and, when these ran out told anecdotes of solar storms and the seasons of the Northern lights. One person in the group had been to Norway and seen these and an animated conversation ensued about the beauties of Nature, natural and manmade. A counter-argument was made about technology and how we couldn't see the natural beauty without the aid of telescopes, aeroplanes and science. And still there was no sign of Gabriel. The Moon had sliced a large crescent out of the Sun now and we were almost up to maximum coverage.

Richard explained: "We are expecting a 75% partial eclipse and we are up to about 70% now. Then things will go in reverse. The Sun will move out of the Moon's shadow and gradually the covered part will get smaller and then all back to normal again."

Then suddenly as the desultory voices of the astronomers mingled with the soft gasps of the visitors and the clouds momentarily blotted out the Moon, there was a light touch on my shoulder and Gabriel was by my side.

"Have you had a look through the telescope?"

"Yes, I have. I wondered what had happened to you."

"Sorry, got caught up in some boring administrative issues with the chairman of the Observatory. We're at maximum contact, I see."

"Moon, moon, rise in the sky to be a reminder of comfort and the hour when I was brave," I said.

He looked at me quizzically. "What was that?"

"It's just a quote. From Elizabeth Smart. The moon is about to rise in the sky and dominate the sun."

"I know where it's from."

"You do?"

"I'm not completely illiterate, you know. I just wondered why you quoted it now." There was some impatience in his voice.

So there I was quoting from *By Grand Central Station I sat down and wept*. Why was I doing that now? I told myself that it was just a line that had sprung into my head because I was thinking about the moon. Thinking about the moon then – and poetry? Or thinking about the moon then – and love? And not just love, but passionate, betrayed, tormented love. The Sun, the moon's shadow, Ulysses and his losses, the campfires and the myths, the angry girl throwing roots into the sky. Red and white roots that would become stars and ashes that are the Milky Way. All of these were suddenly clustering in my mind.

"I need to check on the students' data collection," Gabriel said. "You all right watching the last part of the eclipse here?"

"Sure." I looked up to see Mouse watching us through slanted eyes.

2.

The final phases of the eclipse had passed with less excitement than the start. Visitors had drifted off during the last hour, their questions exhausted. The stalwart astronomers had stayed to the end for the stragglers. The students were left to disassemble the telescopes and unscrew the lenses and shut down the computers which had captured the volume and distance data. Gabriel checked on all of them before we left. Bidding farewell to Mouse, we drove back to the Main Campus parking lot.

“So where would you like to go for dinner?” Gabriel asked. He had been quiet on the drive back and I wasn’t sure if this was still in his plan.

“Why don’t you decide?”

“All right. We’ll drop off one of the cars on the way. I live in Muizenberg. Where are you?”

We drove in our separate cars first to my house to drop my car there, and then drove together to The Green Fin, which Gabriel said he liked. And now we sat opposite each other with the embossed menus in our hands.

The restaurant overlooked the tiny cove of Kalk Bay Harbour. Glass windows looked out over crashing waves. The tablecloths were crisp white and in the centre of the tables were tea light candles in shell candle holders. The sun was setting behind the mountain, its entanglement with the moon’s shadow now a thing of the past.

“Were you happy with how things went this afternoon?” I asked.

A small frown split his forehead. “The public viewing was fine, I think. A partial isn’t really that spectacular. Bit of a bore for the blokes. But my students did manage to get some useful data.”

“What data are they looking at?” I asked.

“Solar storms – size, duration and so on, but why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself and your work.” Suddenly the frown was gone and the grey-green eyes were focussed on me with full attention. He leaned back in the chair, crossing his legs and stretching his arms behind to cup his neck.

“Well, at the moment I’m working on the Lubombo project, as you know.”

“Loo-bomm-bo,” he rolled his tongue around the word and it sounded strange in his British accent. “Yes, I want to know all about that. But what do you do the rest of the time? Day to day?”

“Part of the time I see patients with genetic problems like Huntington’s chorea and I screen families with genetic problems, and then I do some lab work and research.”

At that moment our drinks arrived and I breathed out, relieved to be off the hook for a minute. After taking a sip, he said: “I’m trying to work out where the interest in astronomy comes from. And other matters,” he smiled.

“So you’re trying to work me out? Dissect my psyche?” I smiled but the words came out harshly.

“Actually, no, but obviously I’ve struck a nerve. You don’t like people to know you?”

“I wouldn’t put it like that exactly. I wonder why you would. Projecting perhaps?”

He smiled. “Touché again. You seem to *get* me, as people these days say. All right, I’ll go first then.” His eyes remained fixed on mine, glinting with humour. “The potted history. I was born and grew up in Bristol, went to university there, did my undergrad and postgrad degrees in Astronomy there. I have two brothers, one’s a musician and the other is a barrister. My father lives in Bristol still, my mother died when I was younger. I came to Cape Town three years ago and have worked in the Department ever since. I do some field work, but mainly research and teaching. I’m working on irregular galaxies, I think I mentioned this? How am I doing?”

“Splendidly cryptic,” I laughed as the waitress came to take our order.

I decided on grilled sole with lemon butter and a side salad and he ordered steamed mussels in a white wine and tarragon sauce. The waitress bustled off with the order after unsuccessfully persuading us to try starters as well.

“Your turn,” he said.

“I was born in Cape Town, studied Medicine at UCT, then specialised in genetics. I have lived here all my life apart from short periods in other

towns during my training. I have a younger sister who teaches communication skills. My parents live in Cape Town.”

“So what is your research? You were going to tell me about the mad villagers.”

“Well, I’ve been working with a group of people in Lubombo where about fifty young men have developed epileptic fits and started behaving strangely. They also have specific skin lesions.”

“And this is genetic?”

“I’m not convinced, though initially I was asked to consult because the symptoms fit with a genetic condition called lipoid proteinosis.”

“If it’s genetic, don’t they have to be related?”

“Well, that’s the problem. They’re not related.”

“As far as you know,” he said.

“The cynic speaks.”

“The realist.”

“Mmm...not so. Because you don’t know that it is so. It’s your prejudice that makes you think it. It is only reality if it is proven.”

“My prejudice! And what is my prejudice?” He leaned forward, almost knocking over his wine glass.

“Nothing personal,” I laughed. “Just that if you are postulating that fifty men of around the same age are related when they do not admit that this is the case, then you are suggesting that their mothers are liars or promiscuous or that the whole community is promiscuous, or maybe that all Africans are promiscuous?”

“Wow, you do pack a punch.” He reeled back in his chair, clutching his jaw as though he were hurt. “I’m not saying that your patients are promiscuous. Just that if everything fits with this genetic disease then it’s a possibility that they are related in some way. And till you’ve proved it’s not so, you don’t have a case.”

“I’ve taken DNA samples and we’re waiting for the analysis, so time will tell.”

Our meals arrived and after a few mouthfuls of mussels, he said: “And that would be an absolute truth?”

"Of course, I said."

"Just like the stars outside tonight are there because we see them? You said yourself that they aren't actually there in our present reality because they died many years ago. And look at Ptolemy and Copernicus. They each believed that their cosmology was the absolute truth and yet time has proven them wrong." He shifted slightly in his chair.

"So the meaning of life lies in the definition of the universe?" I asked.

"There is no meaning to life."

"Obviously this comes from your lack of religious belief?"

"Obviously."

"You don't need religion to find meaning. Many people find meaning in their careers, their families, their hobbies," I insisted.

"None of those things are safe."

"What do you mean?"

"They all change, disappear. So how can they provide meaning?"

"Well, what is safe for you then?"

"Nothing is safe."

I remember even now how my skin prickled at those words. Words said softly with trickles of tarragon sauce glistening on his lip, but words that spelled a message. Words spoken with absolute belief.

"Some things are safe," I said, "our beliefs are safe. The fact that I believe in justice and in respect for others – those won't change."

"Really, and if your life were threatened? Would you believe in respect for the other person then? Or if your family were subjected to repeated attacks and nothing was done about it? Would you believe in justice then? Do you think that there is nothing in this world that would shake your beliefs? Not true. It is just when the world is as it is now that we believe what we believe. If that changes, we change."

Waving the waitress with the dessert menu away, I said. "My family's feelings for me and *vice versa* are safe. They will never change."

"Everything changes. Your parents may get Alzheimer's and not even know you, so how can those feelings be safe?" He must have seen the look on my face because he leaned back and said: "Sorry, bit of a hectic day and

not all that pleasant. I'm probably not very good company tonight. Why don't we have some coffee and then I'll take you home."

"All right, but I will find something to prove you wrong."

"I hope that means I will see you again. I haven't completely blotted my copybook?"

"I guess not. You could tell me what all this business between you and Philip is though."

The espresso and cappuccino arrived. He waved his hand despondently in the air as he reached for his cup and downed it one gulp. "I don't have the energy tonight."

3.

The roots of the tree were already twining themselves around me that night, pulling me closer to the trunk. Embedding me in the softness of the wood beneath the hard roughness of the bark. Something about this man intrigued me. Riveted me. Obsessed me. On the one hand he had a cool crisp mind like a knife cutting through butter. No, like a sword slicing through the night sky splitting it in two and at the same time lighting it up with the sparks which sprang from its blade. And he was attractive in a strange way. Not classically handsome, but he had a presence, a voice that soothed and commanded at the same time, a posture that reassured and sat confidently on him like a well worn scarf. And yet, and yet... beneath that confident scarf, there was something else, something hidden, something wounded, something alone. I thought of Samuel and how I had had the same sense, though that only came to me later. Thinking of Samuel made me think of Marissa. Perhaps I should call her and tell her about Gabriel. Run it by her. I thought of those early innocent days with thoughts of Samuel tangling through my body while Marissa fought to save the world.

Back in my flat the kettle had boiled and the water was cold so I flicked the switch again, this time staying next to the counter with the teapot open and ready. As soon as I had poured the water into it and swirled it round

the bags, I took the phone from its cradle and dialled Marissa's number. She answered on the third ring.

"Hi Sis, how you doing?"

"Wow, talk about telepathy. I was just thinking about you. Wasn't sure when you'd be back from Swaziland."

"Just got back yesterday," I said. "So how's it going at Rhodes? Students behaving themselves?"

"Yeah, not too bad. I've been having a bit of a rough ride with Cinders." Cinders was Marissa's cat and the one constant thing in her life. "She's had some sort of virus and has been off her food and vomiting. Seems to be settling now though."

"Rissa, I've met this guy..." I started.

"Hallelujah, at last," her voice bellowed down the phone in mock elation. "Not the guru from Swaziland?"

"No, no, someone I met just before I left. Nothing happening, just... just that I have a feeling something might."

"Okay spill it. What's his name, what does he do, how old is he, is he clever enough for you, are you sure he's not married and, lastly are you sure he's not gay?"

I poured some of the pale yellow tea into a cup and sat down on the couch with my feet up on the low coffee table, carefully avoiding the pile of journals stacked on one side of it.

"His name's Gabriel. Gabriel Powell. He's a prof of astronomy at the university. I don't know how old he is – late thirties probably and he's certainly bright enough. And there's this thing, Rissa, like we're in tune, though we've had a few heated debates."

"Good lord, where did you meet an astronomy prof? And... heated debates! Doesn't sound like good relationship material."

I told her about the lecture at the Planetarium and how I'd met Gabriel, about the drinks and the party at his friends' house after, and then about the eclipse watching and the dinner.

"Well I must say, Lena, he sounds more your type than mine. I like them hot and raunchy with no doubts as to their intentions. Your guy

sounds more cool and distant and ambivalent. But then you always did like the intellectual mind-fuck. Just don't forget what happened with Samuel."

"I'm pretty sure he's not gay and, if he's married, his wife hasn't lived with him for the past three years." I breathed in cooling vanilla fumes and took a long sip.

"There's something about him though, something... mysterious," I continued.

"Oh no, watch it girl. I run a mile from mysterious. Usually means there's something to hide. And that usually means trouble."

"I don't think so. And I like the challenge."

"Well, be careful and keep me up to speed. Robbie's waiting at the deli for me, so I'm going to have to run."

"Robbie's still around then?" I smiled.

"Well, off and on, you know."

"Cheers then. I'll let you know how it goes." I put down the receiver, smiling. I always felt cheerful after a conversation with Marissa.

4.

The phone rang just as my alarm went off, so that I woke up confused and grabbing for the phone at the same time as trying to press the alarm button off. The phone fell to the floor and by the time I had rescued it and silenced the alarm there was a long hollow silence at the end of the line. I thought that the caller had rung off. Then Gabriel's voice flowed down the line.

"Oh dear, this is obviously not a good time. I wanted to catch you before you left for work."

"Oh, why? What's the matter?" I asked, still a bit disorientated from sleep and fading dream memories, and inhaling the morning remains of last night's encounter.

"Could we have lunch?" he said calmly, not seeming to notice my muddled response.

After the strange mood of last night I didn't know what to think. "Well, I'm pretty busy today. I don't know that I'll be able to get away." I decided on a cool distance.

"You must have a hospital cafeteria or something. Couldn't you slip away for half an hour or so?" he persisted.

"Well, yes," I said, "if you're willing to brave government hospital food. But what's so urgent?"

"Something's come up and I need to talk to you about it."

"Since last night?" I asked.

"I was going to talk to you about it last night, but the mood wasn't right," he said.

"And who was responsible for that?" I teased.

"I take full responsibility and I apologise and I'll grovel if you like."

"Not necessary. I can meet you at one for lunch, but I have to go now or I'll be late for work and then I won't be able to get away. Can you find your way to The Crockpot? Ground floor, Hospital Street?"

The morning passed quickly. The petrie dishes needed checking and new samples had to be set up for culture. Some of the results of the DNA studies on the Lubombo men had come through but there was not enough yet to draw any conclusions. I got to the Crockpot just on one o'clock. Gabriel was already there and had laid claim to one of the two seater tables on the side of the room. He rose quickly when he saw me, came across to the door and kissed me lightly on the cheek. My body seemed to be on fire and I was sure that the whole place could see this, though everyone seemed to be discretely carrying on their own conversations.

"Hi," he said, holding out my chair for me. "Thanks for coming."

"So what's so urgent?" I asked.

Gabriel grimaced slightly. "I was a bit worried that I had been unbearably boorish last night and I wanted to explain. Also I wanted to ask you if you'd like to come to Sutherland with me in a couple of weeks' time." The last sentence came out in a rush and ended in a gulp. We both laughed.

“Well, let’s get some food and then the floor is yours.”

After ordering at the counter for both of us I sat down opposite him again. His head was bent slightly as he shredded a serviette, and I saw a touch of grey in his hair. For a moment I saw a hint of uncertainty in his posture, then the grey eyes met mine again. “I’m having some problems at work and I’m afraid it spilled over into last night,” he said wryly.

“Is this because of your colleague, Philip?” I asked.

“Yes, Philip resents my work and the fact that I took over a project that he was interested in. And now he’s making a lot of trouble.” The toasted cheese sandwiches and filter coffees arrived. “It’s a long story, but look, Lena, I really like spending time with you and I would like to get to know you better, and I just didn’t want my bad mood last night to get in the way of that.”

“You also mentioned Sutherland. What’s that about?”

“I go to Sutherland about twice a year. Updating projects. Bit of research. Checking on the astronomers up there. And I have to go at the beginning of May. If I recall you wanted to see the SALT. And there’s no better way to see it than with someone who really knows his way around telescopes.”

“And modest too.”

“Honest. Always honest. Isn’t that a better quality to aspire to?”

“Sure, if you can keep it up.”

“So, you’ll come? I would plan to go on Thursday evening and come back on Sunday evening. I thought you’d need some time to arrange to take leave on the Friday.” He looked slightly tentative though his voice was strong and confident as always. Even a little arrogant. But again I got the sense of something else below the surface. I wondered what this weekend meant to him. Was he just being kind and showing me an interesting facet of his life that he knew a lot about? Or did he have in mind a romantic encounter? Could he tell the effect he had on me? Once again there was the pull and push. He had kissed me on the cheek at the cafe but had not made any further move in the time I had known him. And was it really only a few weeks, when it seemed so much longer? And then those strange mood

shifts. The complete all-encompassing attention one day and the distraction the next. The thoughtful companion one day, the challenging adversary the next. And then the withdrawal and self-absorption. Yet, I liked all this. I liked the attention, the mind play, the mental competition. Also beneath this easy to articulate analysis, I was attracted to him. Physically, mentally and emotionally attracted to him. In a way I had not felt since Samuel.

Samuel had been my first love, an all-consuming first love with an all-consuming betrayal. For several years after this I had thrown myself into my work as a substitute and a protection. In many ways I still did. But after a while I had started looking around. Always the men were the exact opposite of Samuel. No depth and no real connection. No commitment and therefore no risk. And now this. Should I go along with whatever was happening? Should I take the risk? I remembered his reaction to my quoting from *By Grand Central Station I sat down and wept*. About Elizabeth Smart and her obsessive love for the married poet, George Barker. A fairly obscure piece of literature for those not involved in Arts. I wondered how he knew it and what his reaction to it meant.

I felt a warm hand on mine. "I hate to interrupt your reverie, but are you going to give me an answer? Also didn't you say you had some results that needed reading?"

"Okay, but with some conditions."

"Ah your sex that always needs the upper hand!" But there was a smile as he said this.

5.

It was after four on that Thursday afternoon in an unseasonably cold May when we set out. I settled into the comfortable seat of Gabriel's Honda. The bucket of leather cupped my jeans and the angled head rest fitted neatly against my neck. It had been a long rushed day and I was tired. I glanced across at Gabriel who looked relaxed, one hand on the steering wheel, the other poised lightly on the window frame. His jean clad legs were cupped by his own leather bucket seat and his right leg bent gently to pump the pedal

off and on. We were in rush hour traffic on the N1 but Gabriel had wanted to set off as soon as possible to get some of the journey done in daylight. His favourite Jimmy Reed filtered through the stereo system.

"Music okay?" he glanced across at me. He asked the same question each time we were together in the car. I knew that this lilting Irish folk music seemed to soothe him, so I nodded.

"You look tired." He squeezed my hand where it lay on my lap.

"Mmm, long day."

"Have a doze then. We'll be at least three hours. Probably longer if this traffic persists."

I closed my eyes and felt the wind scratching at the windows and the stops and starts of the car as Gabriel slid into the slow traffic. My thoughts drifted, first to the DNA results which had come through this week. I would have to go back to Swaziland in the next few weeks to get some further information.

Then to the past few weeks with Gabriel. From the time I'd agreed to come up to Sutherland with him, we'd seen each other almost every other night. Many of these had been restaurant dinners – his persuasive excuse was that we were both working long days and needed to eat and didn't need the extra work of cooking, so why didn't we just go out for dinner together and then go on with our evenings. But there had been a few other occasions. One where he's cooked me a meal at his flat. A very passable chorizo and kingklip pasta with a green salad which we ate on his balcony overlooking the Muizenberg beach with a bottle of chilled Haute Cabriere Chardonnay. It had been warm and pleasant and the wind had only come up after eight. He'd persuaded me to settle in to his snug two seater settee and listen to a new CD he had bought. A kind of rock fusion group.

"I know Cape Town is the jazz mecca, but I grew up with rock and I can't get it out of me," he'd said.

"It's all right. I have the same problem." I smiled.

He bent to kiss me then and I drew away after a few seconds.

"So you'd better tell me. No wife or ex-wife in Bristol?"

He pulled away as if he'd been stung. Looking me briefly in the eyes, he got up and walked over to the window where he stood with his back to me. I sat very still and he said nothing for a long time. Then he turned round and came back to sit beside me. His eyes were dark grey like slate.

"Do you think I'd be doing this," he spread his hands to encompass the air around me, "if there were?"

"Well, certainly an ex-wife wouldn't be a reason not to." My heart was beating hard against my chest and I was aware that I had offended him but I warned myself that it was a fair question. Not everything or everyone could be taken at face value. "Sorry, I'm just being cautious. Once bitten and all that."

"Okay, fair enough," he relaxed slightly and leaned back into the settee, arcing his foot up against the coffee table in front of us. "Married man?" he asked.

"No. Not exactly. But someone who was not what he appeared to be."

A tight smile stretched his lips. "Right then. I've never been married. I've had one long term relationship. After my varsity days that is. One very long term relationship which had its ups and downs. She... died three years ago. I haven't felt inclined to go there again. Apart from a few very brief and very meaningless encounters."

A mountain of questions coursed through my mind, none of which I was sure would be prudent to ask. I tried to hide my reaction as they raced through my head. What had she died of? What had that done to him? Was it sudden like a car accident, or a long lingering illness which he'd had to support her through? Instead I said: "And this, what is this then?"

He laughed. "Are you asking for a commitment? After one kiss?"

I dropped my eyes. "No, no of course not." He put a finger over my lips.

"It's okay. I'm teasing. You're cautious. You've been burned. You don't want it to happen again. I know, I've been there. So look, I like you. You're interesting, you're clever, you're challenging, you're enigmatic. You make me want to work out what makes you tick. And you excite me." His forefinger trailed across my lip in a quick caress. "Give this a chance. You may not believe this, but I am as wary as you are. I can't promise I'll never

hurt you but I'd never deliberately do so and I wouldn't lie to you." His lips found mine again and his hands tangled in my hair.

The swishing of a car past the window woke me from my thoughts. We were just past Worcester and it was raining now. The road was slick black and a mist of water dusted the windscreen, not quite enough for the wipers to get rid of. The music had changed to Brahms's violin concerto.

Gabriel turned from the misted windscreen towards me. "You okay?"

I looked at him through dream-memorial eyes. "Fine. Do you want me to take a turn with the driving?"

"No, you rest. I like driving."

Just like he liked swimming. I remembered the other encounter where he'd told me about Philip and his harassment. It had been a warm day for late April and the sun stroked the white sand so that it was soft and crumbly underfoot. The sea was green and crested with foam peaks. It was quiet for a Friday evening, that lull in the day between the end of work and the start of the night's activities. That time of day when wives were cooking supper, husbands were collapsed over the newspaper, single women were rushing to gym before their foray out into the night, and children were trying to force a last few minutes of play before bath time. So the beach was strangely uncrowded.

We pulled into the parking lot and he unpacked the wicker basket from the boot of the car. I wondered what he'd put inside it. We took our shoes off and walked over the hot sand. A flat table of rock sat uncovered by the low tide, a few limpets clinging to its sides. Smells of lemon and snoek drifted across from the nearby restaurants.

He opened the basket, set out a checked blanket on the rock and produced plastic plates and plastic wine glasses, brie cheese and crackers, fresh wholewheat rolls, ham and tomatoes, freshly cut up fruit salad and some honey biscuits. Beside them was a bottle of chilled white wine. At the bottom of the basket was a small white envelope which he handed to me. I looked up quizzically.

“You’ll have to open it to see,” he said. “I need to go for a swim. It’s my way of ending the week and washing away its problems. Energise myself for the time ahead. Read it while I’m away.”

He stepped out of his pants and shirt and walked towards the sea in dark blue trunks. I watched for a while as he swam out with strong strokes like a very strong fish at home in the water. A distance from the beach he dived down and came back up to float on his back, his hair slicked down against his head.

I turned my attention to the envelope. It was a small white envelope, unscented, lightly sealed. No name on the front. I eased a finger under the flap and peeled it open. Inside was a white card with a pearl edged border, like an invitation card. I flipped it over. It was filled with neat rows of black printed writing.

“This is your invitation to come on a journey with me. To explore the sun, the stars and the outer reaches of the universe. I will introduce you to new concepts, new experiences, which will challenge you just as you challenge my prejudices and preconceptions. I can’t promise you a bump-free trip, but I can give you enthusiasm and my undivided interest. Are you up for the ride?”

The breakers ripped into the distant rocks and the setting sun threw scarlet streamers over the cloudless blue sky. A seagull swooped down to catch at a fish just below the surface. Gabriel’s head bobbed in the distance. I felt my heart beating very hard in my chest. It was a few days after that first kiss and, despite what he had said that night, this felt like a commitment.

I opened my eyes. We had passed De Doorns and Matjiesfontein and were on the last hundred kilometres from Matjiesfontein to Sutherland. It was dark now, a dark Karoo autumn night. There were looming mountains on the left with netted fencing and warnings of rock falls.

He’d come back, dripping from the ocean, golden hairs glistening on his arms. He dried himself off vigorously with a towel, looking energised and

peaceful, then he raised his eyes at the envelope as he flopped down beside me.

“You’re quite the romantic, aren’t you?” I side-stepped the implied question.

He threw his head back and laughed out loud. “Well, certainly no-one has ever accused me of that before.”

“One thing before I answer you,” I said.

“Mmm.”

“Tell me about Philip and what it is between you that upsets you so much.”

He sighed. “Must we spoil a perfect evening?” But he continued. “When I was in Bristol I was doing some research on the evolution of galaxies, as I told you. In particular I was looking at irregular galaxies.” His finger traced the rim of his glass. “Most galaxies are symmetrical, either spiral or elliptical. But irregular galaxies have no definable shape. They are mostly caused by collisions or close encounters between two galaxies.” He sucked the cool moisture off his finger, an unconsciously sensual gesture, as I tried to concentrate on what he was saying. “Anyway, I was working on radio technology to look at the magnetic forces between these galaxies. This was quite a new technology in most of the world, but Bristol University had a special interest and one of our research fellows had developed some equipment. Up to that point, most of the world was using spectrophotometry to study irregular galaxies.”

He stopped and cut a slice of cheese from the block and spread it on a roll and added a piece of ham. He did the same for me and then filled both our glasses from the chilled wine bottle. “Philip was working on radio technology too, but it was still in the very early stages and the technology was not well developed here. I had some colleagues in South Africa and I was looking for a change of scenery at the time and I mentioned this to them. Next thing I knew, I had a letter of invitation to apply for a professorship at UCT. This was largely on the basis of my expertise in radio technology. I took the job and, in doing so, I took over the section that Philip had been running. Had I not done this he would probably have been

head of department by now and he would have had a research record that no-one else in the country would have had. So I guess I torpedoed his career, and he has never forgiven me for it. He has tried to discredit me and make life difficult for me at every turn. He's a bright guy, really good astronomer, and I've tried to get him to work with me, but his life has become consumed with resentment towards me." He downed his wine and turned to me. "So there it is. Can we turn to more pleasant subjects now? And I take it that all the conditions are met?"

"Okay. Thanks for telling me and I'm sorry about the rocky work set up. And thanks for the gilt edged invitation. Yes, I am game to try the ride."

6.

The lights of Sutherland were sprinkled in the distance ahead of us. Cat's eyes lit the centre of the road. We'd hardly spoken in all the three hours, most of which I'd been asleep or restfully thinking back over the past few weeks.

"It's late, so I'm going to drive straight through to the Observatory. I'll show you the town tomorrow," Gabriel said. A car drove past us speeding by in the opposite direction and hurling a spray of rain over the window. There was only a suggestion of the Karoo shrubbery beyond the twenty metres or so of visibility. Eerie wisps of mist covered parts of the road. The R354 merged into the Main Road of Sutherland. My first impression was of old fashioned houses, gables and *broekie* lace. We passed by a B&B on a corner with a glass veranda and fairy lights on the outside, a few candlelit tables on the inside. Then a tall needle point which was the church steeple. Gabriel turned right at a filling station and said: "Must remember this is the only filling station in Sutherland and it closes at 12 on a Sunday. I got caught out once and had to go cap in hand to drag the owner away from his family communion to fill me up."

We passed a few houses in the side street. There was an air of desolation about them. Not neglect, more abandonment. Like a ghost town in an old western. Two wooden posts signalled the way to one plot, but the

gate had gone, long since blown off its hinges or rusted free of its restraints. Then we were through the town and climbing a low hill up to the Observatory. After a few minutes Gabriel switched the car lights off and flicked the indicator light on. Pitch darkness. The whir of the engine continued and my eyes adjusted to the faint orange glow of the indicator. We did not pull off the road though.

“What’s happening?” I asked. “Why are you driving in the dark?”

“Light pollution,” Gabriel said. “The reason why the Observatory is out here is because it is far away from any light. It is exactly 110 kilometres from Matjiesfontein and 110 kilometres from Fraserberg. Even the lights from a car would interfere with the sightings, so there is a light free zone for two kilometres in any direction from the Observatory. We switch off our car lights if anyone arrives at night. The light from the indicator is enough to drive by for the last 2 K.”

Then we were through a gate and driving up to a low squat building. The rain had stopped for a while but cold bit through into the car.

“I have to check on the research fellows tonight. We astronomers are creatures of the night, you know. Mostly out here we stay up all night and sleep during the day. So the rooms all have blackout blinds so that the day sleep isn’t disturbed.”

“So, you’ll be out of action all weekend?”

“I’ll get one of the guys to give you the guided tour of the place in the morning.”

“And you will be doing... what?”

“Don’t worry,” he laughed as he ran round to open the car door for me, pulling his windbreaker tightly around him. “I haven’t got you all to myself for a weekend just to leave you by yourself. I’m going to take you to the quarters and then there’re a few things I want to show you. Then I will have to spend a couple of hours checking up on some calculations.” There was a pent-up excitement simmering below the surface as he spoke and I remembered how I felt when the results of an experiment came together. Pity that it still seemed quite a way from working out the Lubombo problem.

In the hand numbing cold we ran across to the squat building which was the working astronomers' quarters. It was not without good reason that Sutherland had the reputation for being the coldest place in the country. The door opened to the pleasant smell of burnt toast and warmth and velvet darkness. Gabriel scrambled behind the door for the light switch and lit up a long narrow corridor. Hostel style doors lined it on either side.

"We're rooms 10 and 11. Let's dump our stuff and then get something to eat. I thought you might like to see how the other half lives. If you really hate it here, I'll get a room in a guesthouse in town tomorrow."

My room had a low single bed with a pretty brown and white duvet which reminded me of the doctors' quarters in Lubombo. There was an old fashioned ball-and-claw wardrobe against one wall and a large wooden desk against the other with a few bookshelves above it. A door on the side led to a small en-suite bathroom and toilet. The red marker light of a panel heater glowed beside the bed.

"The other half indeed. This is luxury compared to some doctors' quarters I've crashed in," I laughed.

"Good. I will have to come and go a bit during the night, so I hope I don't disturb you." Gabriel led me to the common room, a large room with soft chairs and a well-equipped kitchen. Apparently the staff left food in the oven for the researchers.

The lingering smell of hot soup and slightly burnt toast faded as the cold wind bit into my face and hands the minute the door swung shut. Gabriel folded his jacket around him and pulled the collar of mine up around my ears. He carried a lightweight rucksack over his shoulder and we ran through the light shimmer of rain stinging our faces because of the sharp wind. He opened the door to a domed building in the middle of the eerie landscape of towers and columns. A lunar landscape in the faint glow of the moon. The expectation of warmth inside the building was not met. In fact, it was colder inside. Like a stone castle of old with no fire burning. He took my hand to lead me up a steep spiral wooden staircase. At the top was a large spacious room with some machinery in one corner. A small stepladder

led to a large handle, like the handle on an old well. He turned the handle and the dome opened. With each revolution a sliver of sky was exposed and a waterfall of cold air cascaded into the room. When the dome was halfway open, he stopped, jumping lightly off the platform. The sky was blue, a deep midnight blue with pockets of stars between the dispersing rain clouds. Flickering pinpoints of light, and in the heavy silence, they each seemed different. Small ones, larger ones, flickering, twinkling, static, blue-tinged, orange tinged, clusters in a hazy mist and single strong unwavering ones. The room filled with bright darkness.

Beside the computer, someone's left over sandwich from lunch lay on the counter. It smelt of old lettuce and cheese. There was faint music in the background – one of the observers charting that night's stars while listening to *Venus in blue jeans*. I walked to the eyepiece of the telescope, but Gabriel was rummaging in his rucksack. He drew out a wooden box with brass inlays and a brass emblem on the top. It opened at the side with flick-up latches to reveal a red cloth surrounding an antique brass telescope. The telescope was worn, like the underside of a favourite pair of pants. Shiny with the impression of many layers of fingerprints. It was the length of a forearm, and quite light from the way he was handling it.

His voice silvered the silence and I realised that I was holding my breath. "You can look through the large telescope. I'll set it up for you and it will display on the computer screen, or you can look through mine. You won't see as much, but it will feel like you've discovered the stars yourself and they are being seen for the first time. My grandfather gave it to me when I was eight years old and I fell in love with the sky the first time I put my eye to the piece."

I nodded and he drew me into the corner of the room under the open dome. Cold sprayed in wisps over us. He pulled me down to sit on the floor. The wooden planks were hard under me. There was a sour smell of metal frosted over and a thin mist veiled some of the stars from sight.

"I want to show you the Jewel Box Cluster. First let's find the Southern Cross with the naked eye." We did this quite easily and he manoeuvred himself behind me, placing the telescope in my hands. "Before you look

through the telescope, a little history. See the bright orange star at the lower left of the Southern Cross? That is called Kappa Crucis. To the naked eye it looks like one star but it's actually a cluster."

His hands covered mine as I held the silver metal tube. "The cluster was discovered in South Africa around 1751 by a French astronomer visiting the country. It consists of at least a hundred stars and it is called the Jewel Box because the stars are so bright and have different colours. So now, I am going to focus the telescope on the Jewel Box Cluster for you."

My hands felt raw from the cold of the air and the telescope was strangely warm by comparison. Gabriel's breath fanned my cheek from behind. When I put the telescope to my eye, I felt my breath draw in. The dark velvet palette of the sky looked so near that I could touch it. It was laced with a haze of luminous cloud in which sat a cluster of stars. The large orange star was the brightest but below it two smaller bright blue stars flickered rapidly. Circling around this triad a range of stars formed a magnificent diadem. Green-white, pink-white, yellow, powder blue, each flickered at a different rate. The brighter stars were surrounded by smaller paler ones, standing out on tiptoe like lead ballerinas in the centre of their troupes. An amazed gasp caught in my throat as I absorbed this for a few moments. The slow laugh beside me slipped over me through my trance as Gabriel's finger trailed along my cheek.

The music had disappeared and I wondered if the unseen astronomer had called it a day or whether he had found something that required his full concentration without the distraction of music. Gabriel leaned me back against his chest and I felt the warmth of his fleece under the windbreaker. He caught my lip with his mouth and I sank into the kiss, my hair splaying over his chest and my hands still holding the telescope which had opened up this wonderland. He deepened the kiss and spun me round in his arms so that I was lying across him as he sat with his back against the circular wall of the room.

When his hands reached for my jacket and pulled down the zipper, then searched for the buttons of my blouse, I sighed and I felt him harden beneath me. The shock of cold against my breast only came when he lifted

his mouth from my nipple and the wetness from his lips mingled with the damp air and rocketed a bolt of cold air through me. I turned to snuggle my chest into his jersey and found myself straddling him. He moved to allow this, lying on his back on the wooden floor. His hand moved to the buckle of his belt and he pulled it loose but did no more. Grey eyes looked into mine and I saw the cloud of passion and felt mine mirroring them.

“Love me.” The words were barely a whisper but his voice was deep and throaty, perhaps from the cold wind boring down his throat. We seemed to be aware of the cold only as a peripheral thing, like a storm raging in the night while we were safe inside. There was a safe house which enclosed us, a unique world which the cold and wind and rain could not reach, and which bound us together against all dangers. I moved over him and moulded the contours of my body with his.

When I woke up I was in pitch darkness and I was warm and I was alone. I snapped on the light switch and looked at my watch – 7.45. Slightly disorientated, I struggled from sleep and lifted the black blind. The outside world lay covered in white frost and Sutherland in the distance was enveloped in a dense white fog. Had I really slept? Had last night really happened? I remembered afterwards shivering uncontrollably in the cold telescope tower and Gabriel holding me and wrapping me in his arms.

“Adrenaline overload,” I’d smiled embarrassedly.

“My God, I think you may be more of a scientist than I am. I’d have put it down to the throes of passion, but you’re talking physiology.” He laughed. “You all right?” he looked slightly concerned.

“I think so,” I said as I moved gingerly, feeling the scrape of a wooden splinter against my thigh.

“Well, lest you ever accuse me of being romantic again!”

“But this was incredibly romantic. Open sky, seeing the Jewel Box for the first time, through your childhood telescope.”

“Yeah, biting cold, hard floor. Not quite how I’d have planned it.”

“You having regrets?” I asked.

“No, no, no. Just worrying about what you must be thinking of my lack of finesse.” He kissed my lips. “It was amazing.”

“What happened to your observation meeting?” I asked.

He bolted upright looking at his watch. “Damn, I didn’t realise the time. Sergei will be waiting for me. I’ll take you back to the quarters and then I’ll have to leave you, I’m afraid.”

“Will you be up all night?” I asked.

“Probably till about 3 or 4. Let’s meet for breakfast in the common room at nine. I’ll take you into town and show you the sights.”

“What about sleep?”

“Oh, five hours will be plenty for me. I’ll be out like a light as soon as my head hits the pillow.”

I wasn’t sure whether I’d had five hours sleep with the thoughts humming through my head. The whispered words and the feverish exploration. And mostly that feeling that I was home and safe. I spent a few more minutes in the warmth of the duvet and then spent about half an hour in the hot shower, while my stiff body gradually returned to some degree of flexibility. I had just finished dressing when the knock came at the door.

I opened it to Gabriel leaning against the wall in jeans and a dark blue sweater. He looked tired and distant and my euphoria faded. With a tired smile, he kissed my cheek. “Sleep okay?”

“Kind of,” I said. “You look exhausted.”

“Just some problems with the observation. I got some sleep though.” He took my hand. “Let’s go into the town and get some breakfast at the Karoo Star. It’s a favourite hangout for starving astronomers after a long night’s observing. They make the best Karoo lamb sausages with fluffy eggs and heaps of tomato and onion. And they’re the only place in Sutherland that does decent espressos.”

The sun had peaked through the clouds as we drove into town, though its watery rays didn’t give much warmth. The Karoo Star was an old converted house which used its large kitchen as a dining room for guests. In the corner an old Aga stove spread warmth through the whole room. There were three other people in the room, all at single tables. Gabriel

greeted them all with a nod and then went over to the counter where he obviously knew the owners.

“Hi Piet, hi Rosa. How you doing?”

“Gabriel,” the plump woman came round from behind the counter and gave him a hug. It’s been a while. You never tell us when you’re coming down. How’s the research going? Last time you said you were finishing off a big paper.”

“It’s finished and accepted in *Nature*. Coming out in the next edition. Rosa, Piet, this is my friend, Lena.” He turned to me and I found both pairs of eyes on me filled with curiosity. “We’ll have two full breakfasts with all the trimmings and an espresso for me and a cappuccino for Lena.” He ended this with a question and a raised eyebrow at me and I nodded.

“Your first time in Sutherland?” Rosa asked.

“It is, yes,” I said.

“Has Gabriel shown you the SALT? Our pride and joy here and hopefully a big tourist attraction too.”

“I haven’t,” said Gabriel. “We came late last night and I showed her the Radcliffe, my favourite.” He looked at me and winked and I blushed. “I thought you might like to do the tour this afternoon. There’s one at 12 and it lasts about four hours. It shows you all the telescopes and goes into detail about how they work, and the Visitors’ Centre is included. That’s full of info too.”

“You’re not an astronomer then, Lena?” Rosa asked.

“No, I’m just an amateur with an interest in the sky,” I said.

“Well, Gabriel’s the right person to tag along with. From what I hear this new publication of his is going to make big news,” she smiled.

I looked at Gabriel but he merely shrugged his shoulders. That distancing that I’d felt earlier was back and I wondered what it was about. Was he preoccupied with work? Was he having second thoughts about last night? How well did Rosa and Piet know him, and how well did I really know him?

The breakfast was indeed everything that Gabriel had promised though I only managed one of the sausages and half of the fluffy omelette which was

loaded with mushrooms and peppers and spinach. Gabriel downed his second espresso while I was still halfway through my breakfast. As we were finishing off, a man walked in, looked around and came over to our table.

“Sergei.” Gabriel got up quickly, almost overturning his cup.

“I thought you might be here, when I couldn’t find you at the quarters,” the man said. He had a deep Eastern European accent. “I didn’t know you had company.”

“This is Lena,” Gabriel said hurriedly. “Lena, my colleague, Sergei.” He turned to Sergei with his back to me. “What’s the problem? I said I’d be at the station at midday.”

“It’s not going to work, Gabriel. The figures don’t compute.”

“Of course, they do. I’ve checked them before,” Gabriel said impatiently.

“Well, from last night’s observation, they don’t. And this is supposed to be the confirmation to prove the reproducibility.”

“Look, I’ll be there at midday, okay. We’ll sort it out then.” Gabriel turned away from him.

“Okay, as I said, didn’t know you had company.” He gave me a sneering sort of smile. “But midday or now, the figures don’t compute.” He walked out with a casual wave to Piet and Rosa. There was only one remaining customer and he had his head buried in a foreign looking newspaper and did not stir at the interruption. Rosa and Piet exchanged worried glances.

“What was that about? He didn’t seem very nice,” I asked into the silence which followed.

“Why should he be? The world’s not made up of nice people, is it?” Gabriel replied.

I felt a thin tremor of tension and the same disconcerting feeling that I had had before with Gabriel, as though there was something under the surface, something hidden. I thought of Samuel and the butterflies of suspicion that had surfaced inside me. But no, Gabriel was definitely not like Samuel. Whatever work problems he had would understandably stress him, but they had nothing to do with me. And I wouldn’t understand the complexities of radiofrequency astrophysics anyway.

“I’m going to have to be back at twelve, but we’ve got some time to look around the town and then I’ll take you to the start of the tour.” He looked at Piet and Rosa. “Is Charlie’s open for dinner tonight?” At their nod, he said: “We’ll have dinner there then. Another great Karoo gem.”

“Pop by any time if you’re in town while Gabriel’s working,” Rosa called after us as we left.

Sutherland was like many other small Karoo towns. The shrubs and the coarse vegetation gave it a sense of hardiness and survival. The people living there mimicked this. Many families had lived there for generations and properties owned by great grandparents were now occupied by the descendants in much the same condition as in the last century. Old Victorian houses, *broekie* lace verandas and large gardens were evident all over. Unlike other towns, the feeling of abandonment sensed on our arrival in the dark was confirmed in the daylight. Many houses were unoccupied. There was an air of dereliction about some of the gardens and old tools and wheelbarrows that had been there for years seemed to be part of the soil.

We got out to look at the old church and at the hotel, which Gabriel said had been renovated two years ago. It still looked like an army barracks with narrow shuttered windows. A short walk took us past a tea garden with a small art gallery. The owner had a collection of framed photographs of Sutherland, mostly scenes covered in snow, as well as a few water paintings of the local houses. At the edge of the town the scrubby hills spread into the distance. We were in the middle of nowhere with the nearest towns more than a hundred kilometres in each direction. The road up the hill to the Observatory wound up past the solitary town filling station.

We drove back and Gabriel dropped me off at the Visitors’ Centre for the start of the tour, promising that he would be at the SALT at the end of it. The Visitor’s Centre was a marvel of pictures, models and interesting facts and explanations about how stars produced light, how the distance to the stars was calculated and historical facts about famous South African astronomers who had made discoveries in this area. A guide arrived promptly at twelve o’clock and gathered the small crowd which had

collected. There was a group of mostly elderly people from the UCT Summer School programme, a small school group and a few passersby. The tour started with some general facts about astronomy and about Sutherland and we then walked up the hill to the telescopes. Several of the smaller telescopes we were told were remote telescopes, meaning that they were not manned by anyone, but could be remotely controlled so that a person in Japan could open the dome at a certain time and start an observation and data collection. We were taken into the Radcliffe telescope and my palms sweated as I remembered the night before. I had not noticed the small control room on the ground floor, as we had gone straight upstairs to the tower room. I remembered the music and the leftover sandwich and wondered embarrassedly whether there might have been someone else in the building while we were upstairs.

The highlight, of course, was the SALT telescope and the crowd became more animated as we approached it. The wind chill factor up here dropped the temperature by at least ten degrees and I was grateful for the scarf I had remembered to wind round my neck. The large circular building looked new and shiny with its dome of mirrors. It had only opened a few months ago and was unique in its technology. It was reported to be able to pick up light as faint as a candle flame on the moon.

The group was herded upstairs where we all stood around a balconied platform which was railed off from the central area in which lay the huge opulent reflector with its ninety one hexagonal mirrors, each one meter across. It felt like a theatre with its audience in the stalls watching the main attraction on centre stage. Each of these mirrors, we were told, had to be cleaned once a month. There was a trolley with a platform which could be raised and lowered to allow someone to go up, detach a mirror and bring it down to be cleaned. I let my mind drift to fantasies of making love with Gabriel on the top of this trolley platform. I was brought back to earth by the movements of the crowd who were now being shepherded to the exit.

Gabriel was waiting at the exit, a tan scarf wound around his neck and the thick polo neck of his jumper peeping up above the windbreaker. The

cold hit like a bullet after the warmth of the crowded interior of the telescope.

“Was it worthwhile?” he asked.

“Yes, fascinating.” We walked over to the quarters. In the common room where he immediately walked over to the kettle to flick the switch on for tea, there were two young men in heated conversation. When we walked in they looked up and obviously recognised him.

“Professor Powell,” one of them stood up and came over with his hand extended, “I’m Mark Mervis and this is Jannie du Toit. We were in your Cosmology seminars.”

“Hello,” Gabriel said easily, taking the man’s hand. “And what are you looking at here?”

“Well, I wonder if it’s not too much trouble if we can show you our calculations from last night’s observation. We’re having some trouble working things out. And you are the expert on galaxies.”

“Sure,” Gabriel said, “Just give me a minute to get a cup of coffee.” He looked at me with a silent enquiry. I nodded.

“Can I listen?” I asked.

Mark Mervis extended his hand to me. “Sorry ma’am. Were you in the middle of something?” Were we in the middle of something? In a way we were, but something that was slowly tightening like a carefully wrapped bandage fitting snugly round a limb, while unravelling a little at each movement. Stretching and tightening. Holding and letting go. I sat holding my cup of warm tea between my hands and listened and watched. Words floated around me, half understood. “That’s a spiral galaxy” ... “you can work it out from the spectrometry” ... “add these two columns and you’ll get the light intensity from its adjacent star” ... “the chaotic edge” ... “star evolution taking place here.” As the words swirled around me, I watched Gabriel relax, move from poring over the data to leaning back in his chair, one foot crossed over his knee. The two young men were spellbound, hanging onto his words. The quiet one suddenly smacked his hands together in a revelation of understanding. After almost an hour, the intense

concentration and the excitement had calmed down to a gentle rumble, like a stream which had passed over rapids and reached a peaceful pool.

"I think you've got it now." Gabriel smiled.

"Wow, yes. And thanks. It's been so great learning all this from you. Can we buy you a drink somewhere?"

"Thanks, but maybe when you're back in Cape Town. I think Lena and I need to spend some time together now." He leaned over and took my hand. The two men looked sheepish and retreated with hasty goodbyes and apologies for interrupting.

"It's just about time for dinner," he smiled languidly. "I have to start an observation at ten. Sorry about this, I thought I'd have more time but things haven't gone quite according to plan."

Charlie's was a small cosy restaurant with a fire roaring in a corner of the room. As we were there early we had a pick of the tables and went for one close to the fire. The logs flashed sparks as they crumbled and crackled.

"Won't you tell me about your research and what it is you're working on now? And what's this paper in *Nature* that is going to make big news?"

"Oh, Rosa exaggerates. But if you're interested, I've been studying irregular galaxies. Let me explain what those are."

"They told us about them on the tour," I said. "Unlike spiral galaxies or elliptical galaxies which have a set shape, irregular galaxies have no set shape and are usually a result of a collision between two galaxies."

"Exactly right. And because they are the product of colliding galaxies, they allow us to understand something about how outer space works, what happens after a collision and ultimately how the universe was formed."

"I take it then that you don't believe that the universe was created."

"No," he gave me a scathing look. "Do you?"

"Actually no, though most people I know do."

"Well back to my version of the evolution of the universe. For several years people have been studying the outer edges of irregular galaxies and they have shown a faint envelope of stars extending outwards from the main galaxy. These envelopes have been divided into three types – extended

smooth, extended chaotic and starless clumps. It is what causes these different types of outer envelope that is interesting.”

Extended chaotic. That was about how I felt after last night. Gabriel’s eyes were filled with passion again as he spoke about his favourite subject, his hands tracing a pattern on the tablecloth to make his point.

“For example, the clumpy ones may be due to falling in of gas cloud from the surface of the galaxy,” he continued. “Also star formation on the outer edges of a galaxy may be related to the medium around it. So the more metals like iron there are in the area, the greater the starburst pattern.”

“Okay, I think I’m with you so far. The stars forming on the outer edge of the galaxies depend on the amount of metals and the amount of gases in that area,” I summarised.

“Kind of,” he nodded.

“But rewind for a minute and tell me what causes star formation in general.”

The waitress came over at that point, eager to explain the menu. There was a set menu with two choices of main course and a bottle of white or red wine included. In a small town like this it was clearly not cost effective to have lots of menu choices. So we settled for the French onion soup starter, oxtail casserole with mash and vegetables and bread and butter pudding for desert. The second main course choice of grilled hake and chips was less appealing, especially coming from Cape Town where fresh fish was in abundance.

“When in Rome...” Gabriel said. “A typical hearty Karoo home cooked meal. Perfect for a cold night like this. And red wine okay?” I nodded.

“So back to the stars. What makes stars form?” He took my hand and put it to his lips, trailing his mouth along the palm. “Maybe this? Or this?” He leaned over and kissed me, slowly and lightly. A jolt went through my body as it always seemed to do when he touched me.

I drew back, laughing. “Very funny. Come on, back to the explanation. I was just getting into it.”

“You make me see stars, you know,” he teased.

“Yeah, right. Remember you’re not a romantic, so don’t spoil your image now.”

The French onion soup arrived at that moment, piping hot and fragrant in brown coppery clay bowls. “Okay then, stars are formed in dust clouds which are scattered across the galaxies. If there is turbulence in these dust clouds, parts of them can develop enough mass to collapse under their own gravity. As the cloud collapses, the central core begins to heat up. This hot core attracts yet more gas and dust and eventually becomes a star.”

“So stars are born when dust clouds collapse on themselves and develop mass.”

“That’s right, and they are kept going by nuclear fusion of hydrogen to helium deep in their interiors. The outflow of energy provides the pressure needed to stop them from collapsing in on themselves, and also the energy from which they shine.”

“And, if I remember what the guide said, you can measure the amount of light emitted using spectrophotometry – is that what you were doing with those two guys in the common room?” He nodded. “And so you can measure how big a star is and how far away it is?”

“Absolutely. You’ve passed Astronomy 1.” He wiped a drop of brown soup from his chin.

“Okay so go back to what you’re doing with the stars on the outskirts of the galaxies then,” I said.

“Most of the literature suggests that the stars on the outer edge of irregular galaxies are formed there by the means I’ve explained. However, I’ve found some evidence that they are actually formed in the interior of the galaxy and blown out to the periphery by an extreme burst of gas. An extreme starburst, if you like.”

“That sounds interesting, but why is this going to make headline news?”

“Well, think about it. Our sun is a star. We know that stars have a limited lifespan before they burn themselves out. It has been estimated by hundreds of astronomers that our sun is about halfway through its lifespan and has another six billion years to go. So, no worries about the world ending for a very long time. Now, with the previous theories, there are stars

forming on the periphery of our galaxy from collapsing dust clouds, and this doesn't affect us very much. They are quietly doing their thing, while we quietly carry on doing our thing. But, what if star formation actually comes from the centre of the galaxy shooting out an extreme gas cloud to the edge. That means that the chaotic edge is brought about by a chaotic centre. And that means that we can become chaotic at any time."

"You're joking. You've developed an end of the world theory?"

"No, I haven't. You see I don't think that any of this applies to our galaxy. Firstly, we're not an irregular galaxy. Secondly, what I've shown for Galaxy NGC 4130 does not apply to our galaxy. But you can be sure that some people will jump to conclusions – the wrong ones. Especially some of those New Age crowd who were at the eclipse lecture."

"And your research fellow. Sergei, is it? Where does he fit in? He seemed a bit agitated."

"He's not really my research fellow," Gabriel said. "More Philip's. But we are working on the same area at the moment and he has been doing some observations with me. He was set up to confirm my findings on NGC 4130."

"And he couldn't?" I asked.

"No."

"Is that a problem?"

I was becoming familiar with the changes in shades of Gabriel's eyes and now, in the candlelight they were dark grey and unfathomable again, but he said: "No, I'm quite confident of my findings."

I quickly finished the last of my onion soup as I saw the next course approaching. The oxtail stew was plump with carrots and mushrooms and three large meaty bones sat on each plate, perched over a white cushion of mash and topped with a sprig of parsley. The chubby waitress swirled my napkin, which had slipped sideways, back into position over my lap in a strange combination of European flair and small town solicitousness. Carefully she filled both our glasses with wine and then left with a self-satisfied "*Bon appétit*."

Gabriel raised his glass to me, tilting it thoughtfully before taking a sip. "What about your mad farmers, then? How's that going?"

"I don't think one could really call them farmers. And it looks like I'll have to go up there again soon. Some of the results have come in."

"And?"

"It's a bit complicated, but ten of the samples show some mutation of gene ECM 1, the gene which is associated with lipid proteinosis. The rest are normal. Yet the men have similar clinical features."

"Do you have a plan for how to proceed?"

"Working on it," I said. "Somehow I don't think I'll get much further without spending more time with the people, learning more about them."

"How do you do that?" Gabriel asked.

"Well, I've met this guy..."

"Should I be jealous?" Gabriel interrupted.

"No, of course not." I thought about Kingston when I had first met him. How wise he had seemed and how everything he said appeared to be an insight into life. And then my view of him had changed. I remembered him in the tribal dress and the trip down to the river. The stories he told of the stars and the Milky Way had fascinated me. But then there was the ancestor ritual, and somehow I couldn't get my head around that.

"Tell me about him then," Gabriel said.

"Well, he's the chief of the tribe in that area. He studied in England for three years, doing Medicine, but gave up because he became disillusioned. Now he's practising as a healer and a chief. The thing is, he knows his people so well. Knows what makes them tick, what their problems are."

"And does he have an answer to the madness?"

"No, not really, though his philosophy is to deal with life as it comes along, rather than look for explanations which are not forthcoming."

"All very well, unless there is a simple solution to the problem."

"Sure, but I learnt things from him." And I had, but maybe I had idolised him too much. Thought of him as a reflection of who I wanted to be. In the end, though, he was a man in his own right, majestic and flawed

like everyone else. "I sat with him at a river bank watching an eclipse of the moon. Can you believe it?"

"Just you and him, in the middle of nowhere? In this romantic setting?" Gabriel teased.

"Oh, come on. If you want to be jealous of anyone, don't be jealous of him."

"What about you then," I said, changing the subject. "Tell me about your long term relationship and what happened."

A shutter came down like a quick release cord pull. "I've told you. She died."

"I know, but what happened?" In the pause that followed, we both started speaking at the same time. I said "What was her name?" and he said "She killed herself."

I stared into the granite eyes in shock. He looked back, holding my gaze. His mouth creased in a flat grimace. "Alice. Her name was Alice." He wiped his hands with the napkin and turned away slightly to refill his wine glass. The mood of the evening had evaporated and a few minutes later after swallowing a few mouthfuls of the pudding on the insistence of the waitress, we left. It was time for Gabriel's observation and I was exhausted so I went straight to bed and fell asleep immediately.

In the morning, after I had showered and dressed and was wondering about what time to meet Gabriel for breakfast, I found a note under my door.

*Up all night last night. Will have to sleep during the day.
Suggest you look round the town. I've arranged for star-
gazing at a farm nearby tonight. Car keys are in the pigeon
hole near the door.*

Gabriel.

Helplessly, I folded the note in half and put it in my purse. I needed to talk to Gabriel, and I almost thought of waking him anyway. Surely one day of sleep deprivation was not the end of the world. But in the end I lost my nerve. I didn't know how the night's observation had gone. Something must

have happened for him to be up all night. I knew that was not what he had planned. The way things seemed to be going with his research, perhaps I should just let things lie till this evening. The sky was dull and grey but there was no sign of rain. The cold bit into the flesh as usual and I pulled on the scarf, the cap and the windbreaker which had become the standard uniform for the weekend. It felt strange slipping into the driver's seat of the green Honda, but the common room had not been an appealing prospect for breakfast.

Rosa and Piet's was warm and welcoming with the bright yellow star on a green background in front of their door, and also the only place I knew to have breakfast. Rosa recognised me straight away and ushered me to a corner table.

"Gabriel working?" she asked.

"Mmm. He was up all night, so he's having a rest," I said.

"Full breakfast?" Piet smiled from behind the counter.

"No, today I'll stick with some cereal and yoghurt if that's okay," I said.

"Sure." He hurried off. The place was busy today. Being Saturday there was a crowd of people who had come down for the weekend. It was more than half an hour later as I was finishing my coffee that Rosa broke away to sit at my table for a minute.

"My word, we are having a busy morning," she smiled. She was clearly a bit uncertain about my relationship with Gabriel and tried to steer the tactful route of not assuming too much but also not taking anything for granted. "You going to look around the town then?" she asked and immediately gave me a list of interesting places I might want to visit. The little art gallery which Gabriel and I had seen briefly earlier seemed appealing, as did a short hike which started just outside the town. "And don't forget to look at our Planetarium Highway," said Rosa.

"Where's that? I asked.

"Just along the main road. You'll see there are stone plinths along the side of the road. They represent the planets and show the size of each planet in relation to the sun, and the distance between the plinths is also to scale for the distances of the planets from the sun. They were built by our

own stonemasons,” she said proudly. As I was leaving she said: “Gabriel’s research going okay?”

“Well, I hope so. He seems to be having some problems with his observations at the moment.”

Rosa looked worried. “That Sergei worries me. He’s not on Gabriel’s side.” Seeing my surprised look, she said: “Oh, we know all the astronomers around here. They all pop in here at some time or other. And sit around talking about all their business like we’re invisible. Amazing how much we learn from them, one way or another.” Emboldened by my interest, she went on, “So you and Gabriel, you’re involved then?” It was the first time anyone had asked and the first time I had thought about it in those terms.

“Yes we are,” I said boldly, “though it hasn’t been very long.”

“Good, I’m glad he’s found someone nice. He’s had a hard time lately.” Before she could say any more, she was summoned by Piet to help with a sudden influx of customers.

The path started at a derelict wooden gate with a sign that pointed the way into a ropy reeded area of squat Karoo bush. My brown boots hit sand and exposed rock as I headed down the trail. The art gallery had been closed and I was glad. I needed this walk to clear my head. So much had happened in the past few days. I followed the rocky path through thorny brown mushroom-shaped plants and hardy succulents and tall aloe trees. Clumps of *muggies* buzzed around some of the bushes in semi-translucent swarms. The clouds were spread out in mosaics on the grey-blue sky and the cold, clear day skittered with gusts of wind. My shoes pounded against the rocky ground and my head cleared to focus on carefully placed steps and thoughts which pattered in the background.

Making love with Gabriel in the telescope had been sudden and wild and unexpected, and at the same time totally expected and safe and secure. And yet, there were things about him which were strange and disconcerting. His long term partner had killed herself. Why? And what effect had that had on him? And when had it happened? Was his coming to South Africa an

escape rather than the job opportunity he'd described it as? How much could I ask him about this when he seemed to back off and shut down when it was mentioned? And wasn't that normal, to want to forget a tragedy, to move forward. In the end what did it mean to me, why did I need to know? Would it help me understand him better? Did that mean I didn't understand him enough? Enough for what – to have a relationship with him? To love him?

I stumbled over a partially concealed rock and grazed my hand as I reached out to steady myself. Take it easy, Lena, you're out on your own in the middle of the Karoo, so don't fall. And yet, and yet, the thoughts kept crowding in as though the sharp breeze was blowing them clear of their confines in their ordered labyrinth of brain cells. What was this work issue? Why didn't he get on with Philip? Was it all rivalry over academic promotion? I thought of my own department. Indeed, there was politics there too. The fact that I kept my head down and focussed on the work did not negate the fact that others jostled for power and position. Rosa had seemed worried about this paper being published and about Sergei. Almost like she knew something more. I wondered if Mouse would know and if I could talk to him. And could I ask Gabriel? Maybe this was impersonal enough for me to talk to him about. But I remembered how he'd shut down even on mentioning Philip's name until very recently. A black-eared sparrow-lark darted across from one aloe tree to another, its brown wings flashing against the smooth black underbelly. I was enjoying this cold, bracing solitary walk and the tumble of thoughts which I felt from experience would reveal and clarify themselves in due course. Why not just enjoy this feeling and the excitement of a new relationship?

In the end, I did the whole 10km walk rather than the short three K I'd originally planned on. When I got back it was well into the afternoon and I drove quickly back to the observatory to shower and change. When I reached the quarters there was no-one around, but a note from Gabriel saying that he had gone back to the telescope and would meet me at six. I was glad of the time to have a slow hot shower, washing away the Karoo dust and then slowly dressing in cream pants and a turquoise top with a

white cashmere scarf. I finished off with a light dusting of perfume which I rarely wore, more because I tended to forget it than that I did not like it. I heard the door to the quarters bang shut and a small wisp of cold air drifted under the door. This was followed immediately by a loud knock. Gabriel was in a good mood when I answered the door.

“Ah, at last. I thought we’d never meet up. My fault, I know.” He caught me up in his arms after appreciatively looking me up and down. “You look stunning,” he whispered against my mouth. He smelt of salt and coffee and old leather. After a few moments I broke away.

“Did you have a good rest?”

“Yes, I feel much better. I hope you had a good day.”

“I had a great day. I walked up the Sterkboom trail and spent most of the day out in the scrub. It was wonderful.”

“Are you up for some stargazing tonight? The people at the farm down the road have a set-up with a light meal and video show, then they wield the telescopes for the tourists. It’s quite fun. And you may see an occultation tonight. I thought you had more chance of seeing it if we went to the farm than if I took you to the Radcliffe on my own.” His hand brushed my lips again as he said this.

I punched his arm in mock exasperation.

“Give me a few minutes and we can go. They start the meal at six as it gets dark early here. You’ll be able to see the sky from about seven,” he said, holding his hands up in surrender as he turned towards his room to change clothes.

The farm was called Sterland. It was one kilometre out of Sutherland and in the dusk the bright star sign at the gate pointed the way. I was surprised to see a paddock with a horse, some sheep, goats and chickens. It seems that in the Karoo, multiple occupations merge together. On the far side of the entrance was a circular enclosure, fenced off with a reedy bush which I later learned was called *muishbos*, commonly used for building enclosures in this hard terrain. As Gabriel opened the car door for me and three other cars

pulled up, a small trim woman in grey jodhpur type pants came out of the white building on the side.

“Welcome all,” she called, “here we farm with stars as well as livestock.” As she came abreast with our car, she turned in the fading light, her dark ponytail bobbing behind her. Gabriel turned towards her, slamming the car door closed. Her face lit with recognition. “Gabriel,” her laugh trilled through the still air, “how wonderful to see you. But so naughty, you didn’t tell me you were coming.” She gave him a small hug and then reached her lips up to his in a gesture of familiar intimacy. Elegant hands with dark red painted fingernails reached to pull his head down to hers.

Gabriel kissed her briefly and then pulled back to hold her shoulders. To admire her I wondered, or to keep her at a distance? The bolt of electricity which emanated from her was quite clear to see.

“Deirdre,” he said, “I didn’t know you were still here. I thought Byron was running the place on his own now.”

“Where else would I be since you turned me away? Byron at least remains smitten.” The emphasis on the ‘remains’ hung in the air between them.

Before I could move away, Gabriel drew me into the circle of his arm, holding me with a casual lightness. “Deidre, this is Lena. My girlfriend.” He looked at me quickly, daring me to disagree. “I’ve brought her to see the occultation.”

Recovering herself, Deidre’s sugary laugh glittered in the air. “Not an astronomer then?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Better watch out, love. He’s married to his work.”

A man had emerged as well and he ushered the gathering crowd into the building. Byron briefly shook hands with Gabriel and then excused himself to set up the evening’s proceedings. A small amphitheatre with a three metre wide screen and a few rows of seats was the first stop.

“We’re starting with a short video of the night sky as it is tonight and then, the highlight for tonight of course – the occultation of Jupiter. I’ll explain exactly what this is and what you’ll see, then we’ll go out and have

some food and then you can look through the telescopes. We have three working telescopes tonight, so there will be time for you all to have a good look.”

The video showed startlingly beautiful pictures of the southern night sky, all taken from Sutherland. The Milky Way was crystal clear and I looked out for the Southern Cross and a hint of the Jewel Box beside it. Byron explained what objects we would be looking at tonight and all the while Gabriel held my gloved hand in his. As we walked out to the *muishbos* enclosure where a warm fire sparked glowing coals and the smell of *braaied* meat clung to the air, I held Gabriel aside. He looked resigned, knowing what was coming.

“So, an ex-girlfriend?”

“I’m not sure I would call it that exactly.”

“I thought you said you hadn’t had any inclination since... since Alice.”

“If you’ll recall I said I had a few brief and meaningless encounters. This was one of them.”

“She doesn’t seem to think so.”

“Trust me, this was very brief and very definitely something I wouldn’t consider going back to. Not under any circumstances.” He rubbed his finger over the side of his nose. “Lena, you really have no cause for concern. This was way before I met you. It has nothing to do with now.”

I shook my head. “You just seem to have so much going on in the background. So many hidden things. Things you won’t tell me.”

He gripped my shoulder hard. “Don’t try to possess me, Lena. I had that once and it didn’t work for me. We have what we have and I think it’s great. But don’t try to prise every part of me out into the open. This is how it is. Take it or leave it.” He walked away towards the *muishbos* enclosure where the others had already gathered around the three telescopes. I swallowed hard, biting back tears at this sudden harsh reaction. I waited a few moments to compose myself before following him.

One telescope was manned by Byron, the other by Deidre and, as Gabriel entered the circle, Deirdre called to him. “Won’t you help us out tonight, Gabriel? Man the third telescope for us.” I sensed rather than saw

the indrawn sigh of breath, but he agreed and soon there was a little group clustered around him. They were all explaining what we were about to see.

"The occultation of Jupiter is when Jupiter passes behind the Moon. You will see it disappearing and then reappearing a few minutes later on the dark side of the crescent moon. Today we will also be able to see Jupiter's moons disappearing and reappearing. This happens fairly often but not always in darkness, so it is not always possible to see."

Gabriel looked around as Deirdre's voice continued in the darkness. "So there you can see Jupiter close to the edge of the moon and in a minute it will disappear. Just ahead of it is its moon, Io. Its other moon Europa is just disappearing behind the moon now. And then bringing up the rear are Ganymede and Callisto."

Gabriel beckoned me closer. "Have a quick look," he whispered. "The real spectacle is when they emerge though." The thin white crescent moon glowed balefully and the bright lined disc of Jupiter sailed close to its curve, its small moon leading the way and the two larger moons trailing in convoy. The other two at our telescope took their turns as Gabriel and I stepped back. He put his arm around my shoulder and gave a quick squeeze, but didn't catch my eye. Small exclamations from all round followed.

"Oh, Jupiter's vanished now." Everyone laughed as a young child exclaimed: "Mummy, look we blew the moon out."

"I want you to watch the re-emergence," Gabriel said. In the crook of the crescent the dark shadow was just visible, outlining the whole moon. I suddenly remembered the song that had been playing as I drove to that eclipse lecture where I had met Gabriel. "*I saw the crescent, you saw the whole of the moon.*" It felt like I could only see the crescent of what Gabriel was and the rest of him lay hidden in darkness, a darkness that he would not let me see.

I now saw a soft flicker of light as the small circle of Europa emerged at the top of the moon, followed shortly by Io. The world seemed to hold its breath as the shy bride emerged into the aisle and Jupiter, first hazy and indistinct, then bright in its glory, showed itself in the crook of the moon. Its trail of attendant moons now all emergent, surrounded it. The crescent

moon with its bright jewel. I drew a breath as did the whole gathering. This spectacle of nature was indeed breathtaking.

Gabriel was silent on the short drive home. We had left shortly after, in part I thought to avoid talking to Deirdre, as she and Byron were kept busy answering the questions from the group. Deirdre did manage to take a minute to say a pointed farewell to Gabriel. "So-o good to see you again, darling," she reached up the painted fingers to his face again, but this time Gabriel avoided them and merely gave her arm a light squeeze. In the quarters, the warmth brought a flush to our faces. Unwinding the scarf from around his neck and loosening the zipper of his windbreaker, he took my hand outside the door to my room, and said: "Can I stay with you tonight?"

I looked down, avoiding his gaze. "Look, I'm sorry," he said, lifting my chin with a gentle finger. "I guess I'm not that good at relationships. I just.... When I was with Alice I felt trapped. I felt like she wanted to own my soul... And it felt a bit like that earlier."

"Well. I feel like you keep things hidden from me. Like I'm not sure if I really know you. If we're talking about the past, then I was involved with a man whom I thought I could trust, and he deceived me. And I don't want to go there again."

"I understand. But I find it hard to talk about myself, to disclose things. I can promise you that I am not deceiving you. Everything between you and me is true. Everything I feel for you is true. Everything about the happiness when I'm with you is true." His voice had lowered to a husky whisper. "I am not lying to you. Be with me tonight."

At the time I thought that our lovemaking was for him, as it was for me, a place of security and safety, but now I think that he was using it to lose himself in trying to forget. But, when we left Sutherland the next morning, the passion of that night and the rapture of the spectacular sky and the closeness of our silent journey felt right. The hazy fairytale of Jupiter and its moons blended with the roughness of his beard against my cheek and, cloudy minded from interrupted sleep, I sank into a warm cavern of feelings that I hadn't had for years.

7.

Kastelorizo. When I first heard the name and tried it on my tongue it conjured up visions of castles on rocky precipices mixed in with country life and cooking smells. Gabriel, Mouse and I had spread the map out on the table and etched in the parabola which would be the path of totality for the solar eclipse. In the weeks since Sutherland I had been thrown into a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. Gabriel was warm and attentive on the one hand but had periods of being impossibly moody and brooding. I wondered if he was depressed, but none of the conditions fitted. He was just moody. When I tried to speak to him about it he withdrew and his earlier words “it is what it is, take it or leave it” kept coming back to me.

When he spoke of his life before Cape Town it was about the countryside of Bristol, of walks though the Downs to his home, of his two brothers, one a barrister and the other a musician. Little of his parents, though I knew that his mother had died and his father was still alive. And lots about the joy of swimming in the Bristol channel. Brean Beach was one of his favourites. “We should go there some time together. There’s a great Downs overlooking the beach, so you can walk and I can swim.” It seemed that to know Gabriel was to know his love for swimming. I didn’t really understand till later how this was a metaphor for life for him. When he was swimming his whole body was alive, feeling his arm muscles tense then lift over his head, the water siphoning through his nose and creating a wake as his arm thudded into the swell ahead of him. And his legs slicing like sharp scissors behind him propelled him forward, a lone creature in the great expanse of the universe. Mouse told me this once when I asked him how to understand Gabriel. He told me that swimming turned Gabriel into a planet flickering alone in its own galaxy.

“He feels all powerful when he is alone out there,” Mouse said, “that’s why I never swim with him. I did once. And I am a strong swimmer, but it was like being with a different person, a different being almost. A seal or a fish or something that was part of the sea. Not human, almost. And that is a disconcerting feeling when you are used to your friend walking by your

side in tune with you.” He smiled as he saw the worried look on my face. “Just don’t swim with him, that’s all. That is something you cannot share with him.” It seemed to me that swimming was for Gabriel his challenge and his meditation. His religion.

And he didn’t speak about Alice. I had tried once to ask him and he had replied: “Let me keep my memories intact. Don’t prise them out of me.” And that left me wondering if those memories were there with him at those times when he seemed to disappear into himself. Did it feel like they had happened yesterday and did the scenes play themselves out over and over in his mind and did he hear the voices in his head so clearly that he could almost talk back to them? Or did they come upon him by surprise? Walking round a corner and seeing a street that looked like a street from many years ago. Or did they snap around his heels like a nagging dog that would not let go? Did he have to shake his leg to dislodge it, only to see it following a few paces behind, just on the edge of sight?

And yet, the other side of him was all I had ever wanted. He was kind and attentive, surprising, considerate. His mind spun in fascinating loops of lateral thought and he picked up ideas in an instant, taking them into play like a soccer pro. And he seemed to find the same stimulation from me. The one thing he didn’t do was come to me for support. That part of him remained aloof somehow and yet he was comforting when my dog died, and concernedly rushed me to hospital when I fell and sprained my ankle. And our lovemaking was passionate and sensitive at the same time.

Mouse and I had seen quite a lot of each other in the past few weeks and I found him a good friend. I tried to forget the look that had passed over his face that day when we had returned from Sutherland and Gabriel had casually put his arm around me and said: “Mouse, I think you’ll be seeing a lot more of Lena. We’re together now.” A look of worry, doubt, concern. But it passed quickly and he came over and hugged me and said over my shoulder to Gabriel: “Good for you. You treat her well now, or you’ll have to answer to me.”

I had tried asking Mouse about Alice but all he said was that she was very fragile and life became too much for her. From this I assumed that

there was some background of instability which had made her kill herself. More of a shock was what he told me about Deirdre.

“Oh, you met her in Sutherland, did you?”

“Yes, should I worry?”

“Not at all. I don’t know what Gabriel was thinking. It was soon after he arrived. He met her at some party with colleagues and didn’t know who she was. She was pretty, newly separated and out for a good time.”

“What do you mean didn’t know who she was?”

“Didn’t he tell you, she is Philip’s ex-wife.” Shock hit me like a blow to the stomach. “At the time, they had been separated for a few weeks. She didn’t tell Gabriel this. They had a brief fling and he soon realised that she wasn’t his type. But in the mean time Philip found out about the affair.”

“So that’s why he hates Gabriel so much?”

“Yup. He thinks that he and Deirdre could have got back together again if she hadn’t met Gabriel. As far as everyone else is concerned, that was never on the cards. Their marriage was over when she walked out on him.”

“Gabriel told me that the issues between him and Philip were about work. That he had taken over Philip’s radio technology unit when he got the job here, and Philip never forgave him.”

Mouse shrugged. “I’m sure that’s part of it.”

I still felt slightly sick. Why had Gabriel lied to me? He hadn’t mentioned any connection between Deidre and Philip.

Mouse squeezed my arm. “He’s an odd guy, Lena. Very private person. Doesn’t like people knowing things about him. Sometimes goes to great lengths to keep his life secret. Like he’s scared that if someone knows something about him they can use it against him.”

“Yes, but I’m his girlfriend,” I said, “He could have told me.”

“You hadn’t known him long when it came up. Probably as far as he’s concerned, Deirdre is of no consequence in his life anymore, so why bother.”

“Yes, but it seems to me that Philip is a big feature in his life.”

Mouse smiled. “Lena, Gabriel’s a good guy, he really is. I’ve known him a long time, but he’s not your average guy. He has his demons. And that makes him complicated. If you’re going to stay with him, you’ll have to live

with that.” I turned away, my mind racing. “Don’t get me wrong,” Mouse continued, “I think you’re good for him, but he isn’t the easiest person to live with.”

The light snapped on in Gabriel’s flat, lighting up the dark wood table and casting its reflection over the pot plants on the balcony. Gabriel sat on a bar stool, leaning over the map and tapping with his fingers on the table. Mouse ambled back from the light switch and sat down next to me.

“So there we are,” he said. “We have a choice of three or four places for the best sighting. Libya, Egypt, Turkey, Southern Greece.”

“September in the Northern Hemisphere will be tricky weather wise,” said Gabriel.

“Always the case, but we can look ahead at the predicted forecasts. Libya will be too problematic, I think,” said Mouse, “visa issues and unfamiliar terrain.” He took a large swallow from his glass of beer. “Light clouding would be okay but, even if it didn’t obscure the sun, heavy cloud wouldn’t work for my camera settings. Did I tell you that *Sky and Telescope* has commissioned me to do the shoot for them? So I have to get good shots.”

“What do you think?” Gabriel asked me.

“Well, I’m an eclipse virgin,” I started.

“Glad you qualified that,” Gabriel laughed.

I gave him a scathing look. “But for my money I think the setting is as important as the actual eclipse. An eclipse with the background of the sea would be completely different to one in the middle of the desert. That’s almost more important than a perfect sighting. I’d go for Turkey somewhere near the coast.”

“Remember that if the cloud cover obscures things near the time, I’ll have to pick up my equipment and move in a hurry. So good access, some form of transport and a route to move are important,” said Mouse. “I reckon that cuts out Libya – don’t know it well enough and I suspect it will be difficult to get reliable information beforehand.”

“What about computer network points to send your photos through?” asked Gabriel.

“Would be nice but not critical,” Mouse replied. “Those things are unpredictable at the best of times. Computers crash, network points aren’t where they’re said to be. They’re helluva expensive anyway. I’d rather get a good picture and clean it up afterwards. I’m not really in the race to get the first picture out.”

“For me avoiding all the eclipse tourists would be great. There’ll be hordes of them on their organised tours with their guides trying to explain all the details to them in the few minutes before first contact,” Gabriel grimaced dramatically.

“So, let’s see then,” Mouse pored over the map. Libya’s out. I’m not that keen on Egypt. I think there’ll be lots of tourists there. I know of two tours already. So that leaves Turkey and Greece. If we look at the arc of totality here,” he jabbed his finger inside the parabola over Turkey, “the centre is over this little island off the south coast of Turkey.”

Gabriel looked interested. “What’s the name? Kastelorizo?”

“Kas-tell-o-ritzo!” exclaimed Mouse in his best Italian accent, throwing up his arms in dramatic Latin fashion.

“Let’s look it up on the Internet,” Gabriel exclaimed, tapping on his laptop.

“Kastelorizo,” he read, “Greek island 2km off the southern coast of Turkey. Six kilometres by three kilometres wide. Name derived from ‘kastello’ meaning castle, blah blah blah... Airport on the island... Ferry from Kas in Turkey and from Rhodes... small bus service... population 430. I think this could work for us.”

Over the next few weeks our plans started coming together. Mouse worked tirelessly on travel co-ordinates, weather predictions and finding the best spot on the island to view the eclipse. Gabriel looked up flights and accommodation. Macy and George were still uncertain as to whether they would make it and the rest of the initial party had dropped out, though they all wanted detailed reports and pictures. In those few weeks, while we progressed slowly onward with our trip to the eclipse and my impending trip to Swaziland came nearer, the relationship with Gabriel settled into a

pattern of comfortable companionship though still tainted by the sudden withdrawals and silences. On the Thursday before I was due to leave for Lubombo, he came round in the evening. I would be away for three to four weeks, hopefully sort out the issues there and be back three weeks before we were due to leave for Kastelorizo.

That evening he sank into a chair as soon as he walked in, running a hand through his hair and looking bleary eyed. I had learned not to pry, so merely said: "Busy day?"

He reached for my hand and pulled me down into the chair beside him. "So you're deserting me, Lena. For how long?"

He suddenly looked unbelievably weary and I reached up to touch his cheek.

"What's wrong, Gabriel?" He shook his head.

"I don't know. Sometimes it just feels like it's impossible to carry on."

My abdomen contracted with fear. This was so unlike the Gabriel I had come to know. The confident man who was always on top of his game.

"Is it work?" I asked.

He sighed, a long deep sound that seemed to come from the depths of his being. "That and other things. Consequences. One can never avoid consequences." He saw my frown and moved away. "How long will you be away?" he tried to brighten his voice.

"Three or four weeks depending on how things go. Why don't you come with me? Take some leave, get away for a bit."

He shook his head. "It's a bad time. I have a semester course to teach at the moment, and I should probably be here when the paper comes out." He reached across to kiss me. "I will miss you though." His beard rasped against my skin. "I will really miss you, love." He ran his hand down my leg. "You'll leave a number and we can talk?" he smiled.

"That's a bit of a problem," I said. "There's no cell phone reception and the hospital phone is quite unreliable. Or rather the people manning it are unreliable. Whether they'll even try to find me is questionable. But I'll try to phone you."

He looked at me bleakly.

“I wish you’d tell me what’s wrong?” I said softly.

He looked down, the grey eyes brushing the dark green carpet beneath his feet. Finally he looked at me and said: “It’s the anniversary of Alice’s death. She killed herself because of me and I can never forget that.” A waiting silence seeped into the room. The hum of the fridge seemed deafening. “I shouldn’t be with you. I’m not good at this sort of thing,” he whispered, “but I love you.”

Those were the words I took with me as I drew him down onto the bed with me, as I locked the clasps of my suitcase and as I kissed him goodbye at the drop-off zone of the airport. And those were the words that rang in my head in the long weeks of missed phone calls and aborted attempts at contact from the isolated plains of Lubombo.

CHAPTER 4

1.

The noisy airport and bustling commuters were now familiar as I headed through passport control towards the small queue waiting to board the plane to Matsapa Airport in Swaziland. Fortunately the boarding was quick and I settled into the small seat as the single air hostess balanced herself at the front of the plane next to the front seat to go through the safety information.

I was excited and agitated. Last night with Gabriel had been very intense. I had never seen him so down and unsure of himself before, and now I would be gone for at least three weeks with minimal access to contact. I might be able to make it less than three weeks, I thought. On the other hand I was really looking forward to seeing Annie again and Ulysses and Dr Marco. And, a thought nagged in my head, I would have to go back and speak to Kingston. I had been quite rude to him at our last meeting. I had been thrown by a world view so different from my own, but that wasn't his problem. I had decided to see him in a way that suited my perspective. He hadn't lied to me. He had been nothing but honest, hospitable and helpful. Goodness, he had even let me stay in his house as his guest, and for no advantage to himself.

The more I had thought of him lately, the more I acknowledged to myself how wise he was and how difficult his road was, caught clearly between a western paradigm and the needs and customs of his upbringing. An image came to mind of a juggler balancing balls and I then saw Ingovazana clad in his traditional regalia with three silver balls all delicately hanging in the air, floating down alternately into his nimble hands only to be tossed lightly back upwards and a little sideways. His beautiful mythology caught at my throat as I remembered again the night of watching the lunar eclipse. So different to the sky watches with Gabriel. My face flushed as I remembered again that first night on the floor of the telescope in Sutherland, the excitement of the unexpected transit of Jupiter and now the anticipation of

seeing the solar eclipse together on a Greek island, which was less than two months away.

As the small plane plateaued amongst the soft clouds, its little propellers chugging away, I began to think of the task ahead. Since the results had come in, I had been working away at data sheets and trying to work out what the problem was. I had come quite a long way. It appeared, not surprisingly, that about fifteen men in the group were just primary epileptics. There was no strange behaviour, no skin lesions and several of them had been epileptic from childhood or early adulthood.

The tests for lipid proteinosis had been interesting. Ten men had tested positive. They were all supposedly not related and this was my first task, to go in detail into their family history. These ten men all had skin lesions, epilepsy and strange behaviour. That left thirty men who were negative for lipid proteinosis and had epilepsy, some had skin lesions and some also had strange behaviour while others did not. I sifted through these and divided them into three groups:

1. Epilepsy, strange behaviour and skin lesions
2. Epilepsy, strange behaviour and no skin lesions
3. Epilepsy, skin lesions and no strange behaviour.

I looked at Group 3. There were eight men. Why the skin lesions? Apart from these they could just be primary epileptics. I looked at other characteristics of this group. One was HIV positive, the rest were not. They were negative for syphilis and other infections. There was nothing of interest in their family connections; they all had siblings ranging between one and six, four had children of their own. None of the children had illnesses of the nervous system and three had siblings who were also epileptic. The only thing common to all of them was that they were not native to Lubombo but had come from the Piggs Peak area. I marked this with an asterisk.

Group 2 were the group with epilepsy and strange behaviour but no skin lesions. There were twelve. All of them were HIV positive. This could explain both symptoms. That left Group 1, the men with all three symptoms. I looked for common features in these ten men. I noticed that

Makhosini was one of them. None of them was HIV positive. They were all older than twenty seven, so in the older range of the total group. They had all been born and brought up in Lubombo. None of them had children, I noticed. So was infertility part of their problem? I remembered the conversation between Annie and Makhosini at the first interview where there had been some discussion about a fertility drug. Vuka Vuka they had called it. A syndrome with epilepsy, infertility, skin lesions and psychosis. I couldn't think of anything.

So thus far I had lipid proteinosis which would explain all the symptoms in that group, except that they were not related, primary epilepsy which I could tick off, primary epilepsy with skin lesions which I couldn't explain, and an unexplained group with all the symptoms as well as possibly infertility.

I made a list of things to do. Re-look at the men with the epilepsy and skin lesions. Check on the infertility factor in the last group and get more detail on the family background of the men with lipid proteinosis. That seemed a fair place to start. One more thing stuck in my mind. The boy who had killed the family. I wondered whether it would be possible to see him in jail and make an assessment.

The plane coasted in to land. The hot wave of air and the hot tarmac were now familiar. I was pleased to see Ulysses leaning on a pillar near the entrance as I took my bag from the arrivals room floor. A few returning businessmen had their jackets hooked over their thumbs, sweating in the heat. The customs officers made a cursory enquiry about any fruit or meat entering the country and then waved us all through the gate.

"Lena!" he exclaimed, "good to see you. You look well." He took the suitcase from me and led me to the car. The fresh country air swirled around me.

"How are you, Ulysses?"

"Oh same old thing. Nought much changes at my age."

"And is all well at the hospital? Any more dramas?" I asked.

"Actually been very quiet since you left. Old Ingovazana came by just after you left though, asking after you. Been a long while since we seen him

by the hospital.” I felt a pang of embarrassment, remembering how I had left without saying goodbye after all his kindness.

The room where Ulysses deposited my suitcase was the same one. The same flowery duvet covered the bed and I could almost swear that the same gecko peered down from its perch on the shower ceiling. I was quite looking forward to seeing Dr Marco and discussing some of my findings with him. It was late afternoon so I decided to wait till dinner time and go to the dining hall then.

This, however, proved to be disappointing, setting the tone for the coming days. Dr Marco had gone back to Cuba for a family emergency though I was told that he would be back in a week. The other doctor, whom I had not met the last time, was a Congolese surgeon, young and suave and mostly interested in chatting up the nurses. In addition, the medical superintendent wanted a report on my progress and didn't seem very happy that I had not yet found an answer and needed more time. The next morning after a restless sleep where I kept dreaming of Gabriel, I walked over to the hospital past the familiarly overcrowded Casualty in search of Vusi. Eventually I found him pushing a patient on a trolley from the X-ray department. At last I had a friendly face to greet me. His large smile and happy round face were welcoming.

“Hello, Doc. It's good to see you.”

“You too, Vusi. Will you be able to help me again?”

I wanted to start with the eight men with the skin lesions but no strange behaviour and negative for lipoid proteinosis. I had spoken to the superintendent about this and he had stonewalled, saying that it would take a few days to track them down and get them to come to the hospital. I kicked myself for not arranging this beforehand. Vusi, however, was sure that he would be able to set up at least some consultations for the next day. He knew most of the men and he said that he would talk to them that night.

“So have you found the problem, Doc?”

“I think I am closer, but no I have not found the whole problem.” I wanted to ask him about Ingovazana but did not have the courage just yet.

In the end it took three days to get hold of the eight men and arrange for them to come to the hospital. Three days where I frustratedly went through records in the Swaziland heat, thought of going to see Ingovazana and continuously pulled my mind back from thoughts of Gabriel. What an unbelievable two months it had been, meeting a man I clicked with, albeit a troubled and rather secretive man who was hard to understand, learning more and more about the universe and becoming increasingly fascinated by it, and planning to go off and view an eclipse of the sun on a Greek island with the man I loved. Even he could not fail to be moved by the romance of all this. This reminded me of that lunar eclipse by the river with Ingovazana. I made up my mind to ask Vusi to arrange for me to see him.

Finally Vusi and I were back in the hot little room with the plastic chairs and the chickens grazing and clucking outside. I started off telling the first man that the tests we had done were all negative; no infections, no genetic diseases. I confirmed that he had been epileptic since the age of seventeen and that he had two brothers both of whom were epileptic. I looked at my notes about the skin lesions. "White scars around the eyes," I had written. I had a look again, remembering that he had been one of the last few men I had seen. The pattern I remembered was a row of small bead-like papules along the lower lids, just below the lashes. Most of the men had no other marks on their faces and some had warty looking lesions around their elbows. Looking closely at this man I saw that he did not, in fact, have the bead-like papules but rather had small white scars fanning out in a circle on his upper cheeks just below his eyelids. They were narrow and flat. I asked Vusi to ask him about them and how long he had had them.

"He can't remember. From a small child, he say."

I made a note of this. The second man had the same whitish scars, rather than the white beads. When Vusi asked him, he said that the *sangoma* had done this when he was a child and had a fit. I asked Vusi if this was usual. He shrugged his shoulders and said that different *sangomas* had different ways of doing things. Suddenly I was excited. If these were tribal markings or markings of a *sangoma*, then they had nothing to do with the illness. They were not skin lesions like the other

men's. I remembered that all the men came from the same area, so maybe they had seen the same person, or maybe the *sangomas* in that area all operated in the same way.

Excitedly, I went through the remaining six men. All had similar white circular scars. The answer came from the second last man, Jacob, who said that his mother had taken him to the *sangoma* the first time he had a fit when he was twelve years old, and the *sangoma* had chanted over him and then made the small cuts with a sharpened bone and told him that it was to keep the spirits out of his head.

"You are happy, Doc?" Vusi asked when we had seen the last of the eight.

"Yes. I think we have different groups of people here and the causes are different. These men just have straightforward epilepsy. The skin lesions were a confusion, but actually they are markings from the *sangomas*."

Encouraged by this breakthrough, I asked Vusi about his village and about Ingovazana. "He ask about you when you leave, Doc. He seem worried. I don't know what happened between you."

"Did he seem angry, Vusi?"

"Angry, no. Just worried."

"Do you think you can arrange for me to see him while I am here?" I asked.

"I will go see him tomorrow," Vusi agreed. I also wanted to know about Annie, but decided to leave this for now. I went to my room, satisfied. I now had fifteen men with likely primary epilepsy, plus the eight I had seen today. Twelve men were HIV positive and had fits and abnormal behaviour which could both be explained by the HIV. This left the ten men with lipoid proteinosis who were apparently not related and the ten men with all three symptoms and possibly infertility as well. These two groups needed to be sorted out, but at least I was getting somewhere.

I went down to the exchange and tried to phone Gabriel but there was no reply. I left a message on his answering machine.

A few minutes after I returned to my room and was deciding on whether to take a shower, a soft knock came at my door. I opened it to find Annie standing on the veranda, a tentative smile on her face.

"I heard you were back and I really wanted to see you," she said.

"Me too. Come inside." I held the door wide.

"How are things with you and Mak?" I asked.

"Better. No more episodes."

"And fits?" I asked.

"No more fits either," she smiled.

"So things are going well?"

"Except for the baby thing. We just can't fall pregnant."

"I wanted to ask you a bit about that, Annie, if it's okay."

"Of course," she said.

"You've been together for... six years, is it, and you've been trying for how long?"

"About four years."

"And you've seen a doctor?" I asked.

"Yes, he says everything is all right with me. I make eggs every month. He checked that. I have no infections and my womb and ovaries are all fine."

"So what did he think the problem was?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "He said I must bring Mak for tests. But he won't go."

"Because he thinks it is not his fault?" I asked.

"I think he knows that there is some problem with him, but in our people the men will not talk about a thing like this. You doctors ask lots of questions about," she looked for a word – "intimate things that it is not polite for us to talk about. And the examination also. It is very personal."

"You went for it though, Annie."

"Yes, you know how it is though, Lena. We women put up with all these things but the men they feel it is an insult to their manhood."

"Have you and Mak discussed this?" I asked.

"Yes, of course we talk about it."

“And what does he say?”

“Mak has a brother who also can’t have children, so I think he knows there is a problem. But he will not go to the doctor. He has not said so but I think he has been to the *sangoma* and got herbs.”

“Do you know what these herbs are, Annie?” I was suddenly attentive.

“The herbs they give are mostly to make men... you know... quicker.”

“And what happens in your culture if a man is infertile?” I asked.

“It is not spoken of. Sometimes the woman goes to *sangoma* and is given herbs and taken into the bush and there she is taken by a man. The *sangoma* tells her it is her husband in a magical state, but really it is a man who can make her pregnant.”

“One last thing, Annie. You said the fits and the strange behaviour began about three years ago?” She nodded. “So that was about a year after you started trying to have a baby?”

“I suppose,” she said. “Yes, I remember the first time when he came home dazed from the bar was a week after I said I was going to the doctor for a check-up.”

“And the little spots round the eyes. When did you first notice those?” Excitement quickened in me.

“I think it was around the same time. When he went to the hospital with the fit, the doctor noticed it. He was worried about it being round the eyes and he said something about a brain tumour, but it was not so.”

“Lena, I must go now, but I just wanted to see you to say hello and to ask you to come to my house one night for a meal.”

“That would be wonderful, Annie. I look forward to it. And I would like to see Mak again at the hospital. Will you ask him to come?”

“I will ask him but he is very embarrassed that I told you about that time when he forced himself on me. So I don’t know if he will come to see you. He is ashamed.”

“I understand, but tell him I am trying to help,” I said as she left.

Sitting down at my desk, I pulled out the notes of the men in Mak’s group. None of them had children. All of them were older than twenty seven as I’d

noted earlier. It could be that they were all infertile as well as the other symptoms of whatever was wrong with them. But, after Annie's story, was it possible that they had been given some herb which had induced fits and psychotic behaviour and skin lesions? There were certainly hallucinogenic herbs in the area, and arguably these could induce seizure-like effects. And what about the skin lesions? I would have to look at them again.

I smiled. I was going to be an expert on the different types of white lesions around the eyes by the time I was finished here. I hoped that Vusi had spoken to Ingovazana. He would be able to tell me about the herbs in the area.

Breathing a deep inbreath of the jacaranda scented air, I felt finally that I was getting somewhere. I did wish though that Dr Marco were here so that I could run some of this by him. Could I run it past Ingovazana? I wondered what he would think. And so finally I put this aside for the night and sank once again into dreams of Gabriel. I woke feeling hot and agitated, the fragments of a dream memory hovering in my consciousness. The sky was already starting to lighten and a pink dawn splayed open the small gap in the curtains at the window. The memory lingered, tensing my body. A memory of Gabriel and me. No, of me trying to find Gabriel. There was some kind of maze. A maze of hedges where each turn lead to a dead end. I could hear him ahead of me close by, but I could not reach him. Shaking my head I got out of bed and decided to make an early start.

Today, I hoped that some of the Group 1 men would come and see me and also some of the men with confirmed lipid proteinosis. I would need very detailed family histories and also I would have to broach the sensitive subject of fertility.

Vusi was at the door, smiling. I had told him about the different groups and now he said: "We have four from first group and five from second group." I noticed that Makhosini was not there. This time things went a lot quicker because there were specific things I was looking for. I started with the Group 1 men. One was thirty years old, one twenty seven and the other two twenty eight. They had all had only one or two fits which had not

recurred. None of them had children. I asked Vusi to enquire as tactfully as possible about this.

"They all have girlfriends," he told me, "same woman for long time," he added with a self-satisfied grin.

"And what about children?"

"Their girlfriends have problem here."

I wasn't sure how to address the subject of whether the men thought they might have a problem and whether they had seen anyone about this, but Vusi intervened.

"When there is problem like that the man go to *sangoma* for advice."

"Not the woman?" I asked.

"Sometimes the woman go too, but it is man's job to get advice about problem."

"Thanks, Vusi, and did you by any chance ask the men whether they had been to see the *sangoma*?"

"Of course, I ask. And yes, they all go to *sangoma*."

"The same one?"

Vusi's face fell slightly. "This I did not ask." He held up his hand. "Wait a minute, I will check." The men were all in the waiting room and I watched as he discretely took each one aside on the pretext of a final question. He returned triumphantly. "All the same *sangoma*. I know him. Man in the village called Kobola, means fighter. He has reputation for curing these problems."

"Do you know what he said?" I asked.

"He gave them all herbs. They don't know what herbs."

"Thanks, Vusi. You have children, don't you?"

"I have two, Doc." He looked sheepish. "We wait long for first one and I also go to this man, Kobola once. I tell you this in case it help you."

I was amazed. A direct line to the *sangoma*'s treatment. "Can you tell me about it?"

"As I say, I only go once. He gave me some herbs, a potion, strong bad tasting medicine to drink. He say to drink it three times a day for first week. I take it for three days. At first it make me feel good. Strong. Lot of drive

for woman. But after third day I drink it, my head feel cloudy, like I am floating in the air. And when I talk to people it is like they are far away though they are standing right next to me. I did not like this feeling.”

“So that is why you stopped?”

“No I stopped when I get rash all over my face. Small white pimples. Very fine, hard to see but was not right.”

My heart quickened. I must be on the right track. This group of men had infertility and their symptoms were due to the *sangoma*’s herb treatment.

“The pimples disappeared when you stopped?”

“Not straight away. Take few weeks. I see other men from this man also with these pimples.”

“And fits, Vusi? You had no fits?”

“No, Doc, but the more times I take the potion, the more it feel like my body is not in control. Like my hand move sometimes on its own. Like a jerk. Anyway, now we have our children without any herbs.”

I needed to see the other men in this group but it looked like I had found the cause here. That left only the group with lipoid proteinosis. I decided to call it a day.

As we were leaving, Vusi said: “I spoke to Ingovazana yesterday. He say to tell you to come see him whenever you like. Maybe after four when he sure to have no appointments.” I stilled. I needed to do this but was suddenly scared of what I would say and what reception I would get. And yet, I needed to speak to him, ask his help as well with the remaining group. I decided to go the next night and went to my room to write up my notes and start on a report for the superintendent.

At dinner that evening I had a pleasant surprise. Dr Marco was back. As I walked over to his table, he rose and clasped my hands. His polka dot bow tie bobbed as he gave a deep bow. It made him look like an old fashioned family doctor. “Dr Brown – Lena – so good to see you. Are you well?”

“I am, Roderiques, and I am glad to see you too. I hope you are well and that your visit to Cuba was not for bad news.”

“No, it was good news. My first brother had his first son. Much celebration.” The Congolese doctor who had not taken much notice of me before, looked up from his conversation with one of the nursing sisters. He followed our conversation for a while but soon got bored and went back to the nursing sister.

“I was hoping to go through some of my results with you,” I said to Dr Marco.

His eyes sparkled. “You have solved the problem with the madness?”

“Well, I think I have solved part of it. I think we have four different groups here. I know,” I waved my hand at his look, “we don’t in medicine like to have multiple explanations for one thing, but here it is.

“The first group are just primary epileptics. I was fooled for a while by some of them who had some white marks around their eyes, but it turns out those are tribal markings. Then the second group are all men with infertility who have been taking some herb from the *sangoma* which has made them behave strangely and also gave them fits when they took too much of it.”

The Congolese doctor looked up sharply at my last words, but looked away again without comment.

“What do you think?” I asked Dr Marco.

He nodded his head, thinking. His brow furrowed with concentration. “I think that you have done amazing work if you have got these men to admit to infertility. That does not exist here, don’t you know?”

“Well, I had help from reliable sources.”

“Mmm, I remember, you went off and spent a couple of weeks with that chief. Most strange. How was that?”

“Do you know him?” I asked.

“Not really. I’ve seen him around, that’s all. Attended to his first wife when she died. She had a ruptured aneurysm. He brought her straight here. None of that mumbo jumbo fiddling around first. But it was too late anyway.”

“The second thing I think,” he continued, “is that you’ve been wasting your time with these epileptics. They have nothing to do with the so-called madness you were brought to look into.”

“They were the men who were collected for me to look at.”

“Okay, go on. So you have a group of men with infertility who went cuckoo after taking some drug. How many?”

“Ten.”

“And then you have another group you were going to tell me about. How many there?”

“Ten,” I said again.

“So twenty men with the madness. Hardly an epidemic as we were led to believe.”

“Those were not my words. But twenty in a population of four hundred is five percent. That’s quite a bit. Oh, and I forgot those who most likely have HIV psychosis.”

“Looks like you have it all worked out then.”

“But the last group is strange. These men all test positive for lipoid proteinosis and yet they are not related.”

He raised his eyebrows. “How do you know who the mothers slept with?” Interesting. The same words Gabriel had used.

“They must have all slept with the same man then. It’s not like the condition is common here, or even known, for that matter. Are you aware of anyone in this population with lipoid proteinosis?”

“How would I know?” he countered, “We can’t test for it and I have to say I’d never even heard of it till you came along.”

“Yes, but clinically. You’ve been here a few years. Have you seen any families who all had skin lesions, fits and psychotic behaviour?”

“No-o,” he pondered, “but does it always express itself with all three?”

“No, the skin lesions are always there but the rest is variable.” I was so glad that Dr Marco was here and that at last I had a colleague whom I could run things by. Although he was busy and preoccupied with his workload, he had a fine mind and I found I could easily spark his interest.

“And also these men who are positive, have no-one else in their families with any of the three signs,” I added.

He stroked his chin gravely. “That is odd. No brothers, sisters. No cousins.”

“Well that’s the strange thing. Most of them don’t have brothers or sisters.”

“Your infertility again? In their mothers, I mean.”

“Herbs wouldn’t explain them being positive for a genetic disease.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I can look through the data with you some time if you like. See if I can pick up on anything.”

“That would be great.”

“Not tonight though. My head is still in a different time zone. I think I will bid you goodnight, Dr Brown.” He rose and gave his dapper bow and I got up too, walking out of the dining room with him.

The next afternoon after work I set off to the village. An unknown girl opened the door. She seemed to know why I was there. She led me to Ingovazana’s study where he was sitting, familiarly, his cuffed wrists on the arm rests of his chair. He rose as I entered. Fading sunlight sifted through the open window and picked out the shades of the zebra skin on the floor.

“Lena,” he said, a warm smile playing across his lips as he crossed the distance between us in three strides and reached both his hands forwards to take mine. I remembered our first meeting with the formal cupped elbow handshake. But now, as he held my hands in his and I felt the gnarled long fingered firmness of them, the uncertainty which had lingered as I walked through the house drained away like tea strained through silk.

“I was worried when you left so suddenly,” he said.

In that moment, I longed to hear him explain again the secrets of the universe and see the image of a girl throwing hot coals into the sky to make the Milky Way, and hear him challenge me as to why his belief in ancestors was any different from a belief in priests or church or destiny.

“I’m sorry, Kingston,” I started, but he brushed away my words with a gesture of the hand.

“You are here now and have things to tell me.”

I nodded. “I have found the reason for the sickness.” He inclined his head as though he had no doubt that I would. “But I need your help with one last part.”

The room was now bathed in a pinkish glow. "Some of the men are epileptic and some have been taking a herb for infertility. I don't know what it is, but I think they have taken too much for too long and it has affected them. Perhaps you know?"

He took a sip from the glass of water by his side and frowned. "I know the herbs in the area and they are safe, but maybe someone has got plants from elsewhere."

"What I really need your help with though is that ten of the men have tested positive for the genetic disease I was looking for. But they are not related. It is a rare disease and for them to have got it independently would be almost impossible.

"But they have it, so we must make the impossible possible," he smiled. "Do you have information on these men?"

I showed him the data sheet which I had streamlined to show only the relevant areas and preserve anonymity.

"You have noticed, Lena, that they were all born in the same year?"

In fact I had not because their ages varied between eighteen and nineteen. "But they all have different parents and different family lines."

"And all born in the same place," he said, seeming not to have heard me.

"Almost all the men in the total group were born in Lubombo and stayed here," I said.

But Ingovazana seemed to be talking to himself, his eyes looking past me into the distance, his fingers drumming lightly on the chair.

"Nineteen years ago. That was when I was in England. Mabuza was the chief here. He took the people back to the old tribal beliefs. He lived in iLehotlo, where all these men were born," he looked at me briefly before continuing. "These men all have no brothers or sisters, so their mothers must have been taken for testing to see why they were not falling pregnant. It is a sad story, Lena, but in the old days when a man and a woman could not conceive, it was always the woman's fault. Of course the medicine man knew when it was the man who had a problem, but it could not be spoken of. So the man and the woman were told to come to the home of the medicine man at night on a certain day when the omens were auspicious.

They were kept in separate rooms and both were given herbs. The man was given herbs to make him sleep and the woman was given herbs to make her dreamy. Then the woman was taken into the bush and told that on this auspicious night she would meet her husband in this magical place and they would make a baby.

“But it would not be her husband who took her that night, but another man of proven virility. In her dream-like state she did not know this. When she and her husband awoke, they would be lying next to each other in the same room.”

“So you are saying that the mothers of these men were all impregnated by the same man?” I gasped.

Ingovazana nodded.

“And he had lipoid proteinosis?”

“That I don’t know. But I do know that there was a man here at that time who had strange white lidded eyes and he was mad. The people did not think him mad though. They thought he was a guide from the ancestors because he had visions and he heard the ancestors talking through him. He was friends with Mabuza.”

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“He left the village one night and he was found the next day hanging from a tree. Whether he did it himself or whether someone did it to him I do not know, but that is often the story of madness and divinity in our people.”

“It all makes sense,” I whispered to myself, coming back out of the dream-like state of listening once again to Ingovazana’s gravelly voice telling his stories almost beyond belief.

“So now, Lena, you have solved your puzzle. Does it make you happy?” he said.

“Well, of course.”

“And does it make a difference?” I looked at him in puzzlement.

“The men with the epilepsy are all taking medicine, those who took the herbs stopped when they felt its effects, and these men with the genetic disease there is nothing that can be done for them. All we have is to deal with the consequences, which were there even before you knew the cause.”

"I cannot agree, Kingston. It is always useful to know the cause. If not for these particular men, then for others. To help them to know not to take those herbs, for example."

"Be careful, Lena, of the Veil of Maya."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"This term I learnt in England from a philosopher, but it fitted so well with my beliefs. It means that we go through life in a state of delusion, focussed on our own small lives and not seeing the truth of the world as it really is. Do not confuse your own goal, your own pleasure in solving the puzzle, with the reality of what it means for these men." His face softened. "But I do agree that there has been some benefit. We have met and we have learnt from each other and that is good."

"And what have you learnt from me, Ingovazana?" I asked softly.

"That there are some people in this world who will open their hearts to new things, even things that are very foreign to them. And will accept them as different but not less. That is rare."

I thought of my misgivings when I had left Lubombo the last time. Of my reactions to Kingston's ancestor rituals. What did I think now? I looked into his eyes and saw the kindness and the acceptance of me, despite my behaviour. And I knew that he was a good man and that his beliefs were a part of what made him so.

After the slow ride home and the stilling of the night birds and the unexpected hoot of an owl and the clear strong jacaranda scent, I finished my report.

2.

Mouse's call had come surprising and unexpected late in the night. A rapping at my door and a hurried, agitated voice. "Doc, Doc emergency, you come now," had woken me. Disorientated, I wondered how this could be. I was not at home, not on call. I couldn't be summoned to an emergency. But the rapping continued. "Doc, call from Cape Town. You come now."

I was up on my feet, snatching at the door knob, the taste of aloe in my mouth as I raced down the narrow dark corridors with the telephone exchange man. Mouse's disembodied voice came down the crackling line.

"Lena, Thank goodness. I've been trying all day. First no-one answers the phone, then when they finally do they don't know who you are."

"Mouse," I interrupted, ice water coursing through my veins, "What is it? What's wrong?"

His voice stilled to the calmer version that I knew. I could see him settling his huge body and taking a deep breath. "Lena, you have to come home. Gabriel's gone."

My body seemed to be floating in thick cloying smoke. "No, no, sorry, I don't mean he's dead," Mouse continued. "His paper came out in *Nature* and now he's been accused of faking the data. And he's disappeared." The two telephone operators were staring at me with widened eyes and I realised that I was holding the phone with both hands and my knuckles stood out hard and white.

"What do you mean, he's disappeared?" my voice croaked and I tasted blood on my lip.

"Lena, I can't tell you everything. The line's too bad. But there's going to be an inquiry. It's been all over the papers. I've tried to find Gabriel but he's gone. He's not at home, he's not been to work. I got into his house and his things are all gone. I found his cell phone on the kitchen table."

My lungs filled with the smell of aeroplane fuel as the small plane lifted up from the tarmac, juddering and labouring as its propellers whirled outside the window beside my seat. The plane was full today. I had the last seat, the emergency seat above the wing, its sliding sheets vibrating through me continuously. In the rattling plane twelve hours after the call, unsettled by my hasty packing, explanations, emergency plane booking and rushed drive to the airport with Ulysses, I seemed to be in the middle of a tornado. People and objects whirled around me on the periphery of my vision and my thoughts catapulted in confusion. I could smell ashes all around me. Gabriel had faked his research paper? Scientific fraud? The words coursed

through me like a whip across the back. Surely that was not possible. This was the man I loved. I believed him, believed in him. And yet. The little nagging doubt tugged at my mind. He had been so secretive. I remembered the encounter with Sergei in Sutherland. What was it he had said. The data didn't compute. But Gabriel had said he was sure of his findings. And yet, if they were wrong, why had he run away? Why had he not called me? Wasn't I supposed to be his safe space? Why hadn't he run to me? Did this mean that everything was a lie? My body felt like it was tied to two horses each pulling in the opposite direction.

Mouse was there when the plane landed and he caught me up in a great bear hug. Marissa was there too. "I had to call her to get your number in Lubombo," Mouse said. They both looked at me with worried eyes.

"Is it true?" I whispered, staring at Mouse.

"I don't know," he sighed.

Marissa for once was silent, just holding my hand tightly.

"Tell me what happened," I said as we drove to Mouse's place, a warm, messy cottage in Harfield that I'd been to only once. He boiled some coffee and offered me some whisky with it to which I shook my head.

"The paper came out on Friday," Mouse started. There was a small piece in *The Times* and quite a lot of editorial comment in the journals. We went out and celebrated, Gabriel and I and some of his colleagues. He was upbeat and spoke about you and how it was a pity you weren't here to celebrate with him." My heart contracted. "Then on Monday apparently, he was called in by the head of department and asked to produce his data. Someone had said that it wasn't accurate. I don't know what happened there – I heard this from Macy, you know she works in the department with Gabriel." I nodded. "Anyway, the head of department was sufficiently disturbed to set up an inquiry panel. On Wednesday there were headlines all over the newspapers." He produced a copy of the *Argus* and the *Cape Times*.

"A-rated scientist accused of scientific fraud" one headline blazed, and "British astronomer fakes paper" the other.

“Someone obviously leaked the story to the press,” Mouse continued. “I last spoke to Gabriel on Sunday and I went straight over there when I saw the papers. His flat was locked and his phone was off. So I went to the Astronomy Department where I heard the story from Macy. Gabriel hadn’t been to work since Monday. She hasn’t seen him either.” Mouse tapped his fingers agitatedly against the palm of his hand. “I went back to Muizenberg and broke into his house. I was worried,” he said in response to my look. “His clothes are all gone, Lena, and his books and his papers. And the telescope.” My heart sank.

“No note?” I asked.

He shook his head.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER 5

1.

The train I was on chugged slowly through green English countryside to a story for which I had no idea of the ending. I felt like I was a character in a dream. The old cliché of the dream from which one wished to awaken to find a happy ending. The plane ride had been long and packed and unfriendly and London Paddington had bristled with newspaper laden businessmen who pulled up their noses at the delays my luggage caused to their passage. The snug train seat had been a relief and I turned my face to the window and tried to lose myself in the fields and meadows on the other side. I tried to think that this was where Gabriel was, that I would find him here. Tried to feel his presence, willed him to be here, but nothing came back to me.

Mouse had given me some contact addresses and numbers and suggested that this was the most likely place to look. After the initial shock, we tried to gather the facts. Mouse took me to Macy's house, the beautiful bay windowed sitting room now saddened with the gloomy revelations. As Macy worked in the Astronomy Department, she knew more than the rest of us about what had happened. She had seen Gabriel come out of John Maxwell, the Department Head's office, ashen faced. His office was down the passage from hers and she followed him there, opening the door without a knock. She found him sitting at his desk with his head in his hands.

"What is it, Gabriel?" she'd asked.

He looked up with unseeing eyes, shaking his head and running fingers through his hair. "They've got to me." He would say no more and hurried Macy out of his office with a quick "I have to go," before taking his briefcase and rushing down the corridor out onto University Avenue.

Macy had gone straight to John Maxwell's secretary where she learnt that there was some hint of academic misconduct. Philip Wiley had been in and out of Maxwell's office during the morning, bringing reams of documents with him and at one stage bringing one of the research fellows

along as well. At the end of the morning Maxwell had sent for Gabriel. He had spent half an hour in the office and come out looking “like a sheet” according to the secretary. Over the course of the day, facts slowly came to light. Philip alleged that Gabriel had faked his data on Galaxy NC 4150 and that the theories based on these data were therefore incorrect. He seemed to have information to support his allegations and the research fellow who had worked with Gabriel at Sutherland recently also brought his data which contradicted Gabriel’s. Maxwell issued a short statement to the staff that Professor Powell would be investigated for scientific fraud and that an inquiry panel would be constituted in the next few days, pending a formal disciplinary hearing.

Macy finished her story and silence hung in the room, a clicking of a cricket outside the only sound. Mouse sat in one of the claw footed Victorian chairs, looking oversized and out of place.

“So what do you think, Macy?” Finally it was he who broke the silence.

“Do you mean, do I think it’s true?” she asked.

We all looked at her expectantly. “Well, I can’t believe Gabriel would do something like that. But I don’t know any details about the work. It’s not something he ever spoke to me about. In fact,” she paused, thinking back, “he was always quite evasive whenever I asked him anything about his latest work.”

“Gabriel’s evasive about everything,” Mouse said. “That’s just how he is. Doesn’t like people to know things about him. Seems to think they will see into his soul.”

“And what’s in his soul that can’t be seen?” Marissa, who had come along with us, demanded.

“Nothing bad, I don’t believe. Some people are just like that,” he shrugged.

We gathered again at Macy’s house a few nights later after the preliminary inquiry. She told us that Philip and Sergei had been there as witnesses and had presented their data which refuted Gabriel’s. Also Sergei had apparently told the panel how he had warned Gabriel that the conclusions

Gabriel had drawn were wrong, but he had ignored him. It seemed that their evidence had been fairly compelling and, since Gabriel wasn't there to defend himself, the panel had reached a preliminary verdict of guilty, pending Gabriel's presentation in his defence.

My heart had curled in on itself, reaching into a place deep down inside itself and it was several minutes before I registered that Mouse and Marissa were both speaking to me.

"Lena, has he had no contact with you?"

I shook my head. Tears suddenly pooled at the corners of my eyes.

"What do we do now?" I heard Macy's voice in the distance.

Mouse gathered himself together. "I don't know why he's run off, but I think it's most likely that he's gone back to Bristol."

"Do you know his family?" Marissa asked. "Do you have phone numbers for them?"

"I have a number for his brother. And I think I may have an address for his aunt. I stayed there once when I was visiting. His Mum's dead and he never got on that well with his Dad."

"Well, we can phone the brother," said Marissa.

"We can't very well phone the guy and say: "Hi, your brother's run away after a fraud charge. Have you seen him?" Macy said.

"You're right," said Mouse. "How do we break the news to his family?"

The world seemed to grow calm around me. I remembered the tickling ants by the river in Lubombo and the smell of trampled grass and the silver glint of the moon on the river and the deep voice of Ingovazana telling the stories of his people.

"I'll go," I said. "I'll go to Bristol. I will find him."

Bristol Temple Meads, the sanitised voice on the intercom broadcast. The name intrigued me the first time I heard it. A temple in a meadow. The train slid into the station and clicked to a standstill. After the noise and the activity of disembarking the platform was suddenly quiet. I stood breathing in the smell of damp iron sleepers, the cold sharpness of the autumn wind cutting through me. This was Gabriel's home. Pulling my jacket around

me, I walked down from the platform, past the newsagent and the sweet shop. The small shop was out of juice and a cold can of coke stung my hands. A damp mist hung over the brown station building and a short row of taxis rattled over the cobblestones outside the exit. Beyond the station concourse, ugly drab buildings surrounded the street.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and I was exhausted from the long flight and then the scramble to Paddington and from there the two hour train ride to Bristol. I had the phone number of Barry, Gabriel's brother, in my handbag, though I had not yet thought of how to make the approach. I stepped into the taxi which had drawn up beside me.

"Where to, luv?" the taxi driver asked as he hoisted my suitcase into the back seat.

I mentioned the name of the guesthouse I had booked and, after a short drive we were there. I phoned Mouse to tell him that I had arrived safely and that I really didn't know what to say to Barry.

"Always best to come straight out with it," he said. "Phone and tell him you're a friend of Gabriel's and you'd like to come and talk to him. You'll soon tell if he's heard from him or not. And then tell him what you know. Which is not much, at this stage, I have to say."

Barry and Charlotte Powell lived in a three storey terraced house in Clifton Village. It had neat balconies with rows of neatly positioned pot plants and exuded an air of expensive good taste. When I had phoned last night, Barry had reacted with carefully hidden surprise when I announced myself as a friend of Gabriel's, making me think that this had not happened before. However, he had been politely friendly and invited me round for tea the following afternoon. I had spent the day walking through Bristol to clear my head and the early part of the afternoon I had spent in Clifton, so that I could be close by for the appointment.

Bristol Cathedral was impressive but I didn't want to be distracted by spending time inside looking at its artefacts, so I walked past, trying to get a feel for the place where Gabriel had lived. The long curve of Whiteladies Road wound up to the top of a hill where a sign on a whitewashed pub read

Blackboys Hill. I saw a small plaque here commemorating the slave trade which had flourished in this area and smiled at the irony of the names, especially coming from South Africa. I decided to have a sandwich in the small pub at the top of the hill. A friendly waitress directed me to a polished wood table by the window and brought me a laminated menu.

"I'll just have a toasted cheese sandwich please and a pot of tea, if I could," I said.

"Okey dokey. You from America then?"

"No, I'm not."

"Australia?"

"I'm from South Africa."

"Oh, Mandela!" She winked conspiratorially. "You on holiday then?"

"Kind of," I replied, trying to avoid further conversation.

I spent some time in the small antique shops in Clifton and then slowly walked up narrow intersecting side streets to Granby Hill. I rapped the brass knocker and stood back to admire the carved plaster facade around the door. A minute later it was opened by a tall, lanky man wearing a dark suit.

"Lena?" he enquired, inclining his head to the side.

I nodded and extended my hand which he shook swiftly and then held the door open for me to enter. An elegant woman walked into the hallway from one of the other rooms.

"My wife, Charlotte," Barry said.

She gave me a big friendly smile and ushered me through into the sitting room. "How nice to see a friend of Gabriel's. He should have told us you were coming, then we could have arranged to show you around. But we haven't heard from him for a while. Not that that's unusual," she laughed.

So I had my answer and my heart sank slightly though I guess I had known this already from Barry's response to my phone call last night. They knew nothing and hadn't seen him since his disappearance. Now it was my task to break the news to them. I didn't really know much about Gabriel's relationship with his brother. Though there didn't seem to be any animosity, I also wasn't sure whether there was any closeness. Barry Powell

was in his early fifties I guessed with greying hair at the temples. There was a slight resemblance to Gabriel in the slant of his nose, but that was all. He looked every inch the successful solicitor, completely in control of his environment.

“Are you on holiday then, Lena? You weren’t clear when you called last night?” I had sunken into a deep maroon velvet arm chair which faced the window.

“Not exactly. Actually I was hoping that you might be able to tell me whether you know where Gabriel is.” I decided to follow Mouse’s advice and be direct.

“Tell you where he is? As far as I know he’s in Cape Town. If he’s not there and he hasn’t told you, then presumably he doesn’t want you to know where he is,” he frowned, his body tensing fractionally. The consummate lawyer, looking for chinks in his opponent’s armour.

Charlotte rose from her chair and held up both hands in a pacifying gesture. “Now, now Barry, don’t get on your high horse. Obviously there’s something going on with Gabriel and I think that Lena has come to us for help. Why don’t we have some tea and we can talk.” She raised her beautifully shaped eyebrow. “That all right, Lena?”

I smiled gratefully. “Yes, thanks.”

“Come on then, darling, come and help me make the tea. Be back in a minute,” she said pulling him along with her into the kitchen.

The window overlooked the Clifton Suspension Bridge and Mouse’s first meeting with Gabriel flashed through my mind. Was he out there somewhere, alone and in pain? The spectacular view hazed over as the autumn mist streaked white tentacles over the sky.

When Barry and Charlotte returned with a pot of tea, some cups, plates and biscuits, he was calmer though anxious to get to the bottom of what this was about, and I had decided what to say.

“Gabriel and I have become close over the past few months,” I continued doggedly, ignoring Barry’s frown. Clearly he knew nothing about me. “Unfortunately a bad thing has happened. Gabriel produced a paper which came out in *Nature* a few weeks ago. Now he has been accused of fraud.”

“What!” Barry leapt to his feet and Charlotte looked shocked. “But what does Gabriel have to say about this? Surely he can defend himself. Show his data or something.”

“I’m afraid Gabriel has disappeared,” I said quietly.

Charlotte, who had risen to her feet and taken her husband’s arm, gasped and put her hand to her mouth. Barry’s aquiline face crumpled before my eyes and he sank slowly back into his chair. Charlotte put her arm round him, her hand resting gently on his cheek.

“No,” he said to himself, mumbling something that sounded like: “Not again.”

“Darling. Let Lena tell us what she knows,” Charlotte said.

Suddenly I was the one in control, leaning back on my training in breaking bad news. Through all the years of giving patients information which would devastate them and change their lives, there had never been a more difficult moment than this because this was news in which I was deeply involved. So I told them the story of how I had been away for a few weeks, about the late night phone call from Mouse and my return to Cape Town to find him gone, about the inquiry and the preliminary verdict, about the search for Gabriel in Cape Town only to find that he had left with all his belongings. We all sat in silence as my voice slipped on the last word.

Barry looked at his wife in bewilderment. “Of all the preposterous things Gabriel has done, he wouldn’t fake his work. Not something so important to him. Surely?” He looked at her beseechingly.

She gave a small shrug of her shoulders. “We don’t know what this is all about, darling. Not unless he were here for us to ask him.”

“But why has he run away. Why doesn’t he defend himself? I could have helped him. Told him the technicalities and the legalities.”

He turned back to me. “What do you think of all this, Lena?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I was hoping that he had come back here and that you would have seen him.”

“I suppose we’re not the first people he would have come to even if he did come back to Bristol,” Barry sighed.

“You don’t get on?” I asked.

"We did. Till he pulled that stunt of running off to South Africa without telling us. Only heard about it when he was there, job in hand."

"They get on just fine," Charlotte interjected, "just that they had a big argument about the South Africa thing and things haven't been quite the same since."

"Why did he run away, as you put it, to South Africa?" I asked, my mouth dry.

"Well, don't you know?" Barry exclaimed impatiently. "What is it between you anyway? You said you were close. What does that mean?"

"Barry," Charlotte interrupted again, "You're not in your courtroom now. Don't interrogate her."

"It's all right," I said. "We've been involved for the past few months. Gabriel's not that easy to get close to, but I thought this was special." Tears burned suddenly at the corners of my eyes.

"Of course it is. You've come all this way to look for him," Charlotte said gently.

Barry had regained his composure after pouring himself a large tot of whisky which he downed with a quick gulp and a grimace. "Sorry, this must be just as hard on you as it is on us. You asked why he ran away to South Africa. Did he tell you about Alice?"

2.

Bristol in autumn was covered in russet leaves and flaking trees and picture perfect buildings in a variety of architectural designs. The Cathedral and the Suspension Bridge dominated the tourist routes but the hidden side streets revealed wonders of cobblestoned roads and the sharp ups and downs of the hills upon which the city was built. None were so steep or so imposing as Vale Road in Totterdown where I was going to see Aunt Jessie.

Charlotte had suggested that I go and talk to Barry and Gabriel's great aunt Jessie. She said that if anyone knew what had really happened with Alice it would be her. Jessie was the sister of Gabriel's maternal grandfather, the one who had given him his first and most treasured

telescope. If he had spoken to anyone, Charlotte said, it would have been to her. He had run away to South Africa after Alice's death and they assumed it was to get away from the memories which would haunt him in Bristol, but now he had run away again for a different reason.

Armed with a map and an address I decided to take a cab rather than navigate my way there by bus. Totterdown was one of the suburbs in the south of Bristol and not an area which most people knew well. I hailed a taxi just outside the Cathedral and was somewhat taken aback at the driver's response.

"I'll take you part of the way there, luv, but you'll have to walk the rest. My cab's old, won't make it down that hill."

The drive wound past an old church of red brick, smaller but almost more striking than Bristol Cathedral. "St Mary Redcliffe," the driver pointed, seeing my gaze. From there we passed over the River Avon and then along a road which rose steeply up from the river bank. Above us I could see a large Victorian terraced housing area with rows of houses painted in different colours from pale blues and pinks to a bright red and yellow. They looked like the old fashioned bathing huts at Muizenberg beach. The cab driver coaxed his vehicle slowly up the steep road for about five minutes and then drew into the curb at an angle. He pointed to a sign on the left saying Vale Street.

"This is as far as I'm going, luv. That there's your road. Walk up the steps on the side and hang on to the railing."

I paid him his fare and walked over to the steep incline. There was a set of ten cement steps leading up to the slanting pavement and, taking his advice, I held on to the black stumps supporting the railing and climbed slowly up to number twelve.

Jessie was a small woman with a rounded back, I wondered whether from age or from negotiating the hill over many years. She had short grey hair cut straight across at chin length and she wore an old fashioned printed dress covered with a cream hand knitted jersey. Charlotte had phoned to tell her about me and now she took my hand drawing me into the small entranceway. I felt like I was stepping back into Gabriel's childhood.

The ball-and-claw dresser in the hallway was similar to the one at Grandpa's house, and images of the farm and Mtute and my innocent childhood explorations flashed through my mind.

"Come in. You must be Lena." She had a worried look on her face and as soon as we were seated in her sitting room, she said: "Tell me about Gabriel."

"I was hoping you'd be able to tell me something. Did Charlotte tell you what's happened?"

"Yes, yes, she told me about the fraud story and that he's run away."

"Well I'm afraid that's all I know. Have you heard from him?" I asked.

"He phoned me a few days ago on my birthday. He always phones on my birthday. Said he might be visiting soon, but he didn't say anything else. Did say he's met someone nice – that must be you. Told me about it in his letters and I asked when he phoned. I always ask, you see. Since Alice."

"Can you tell me about Alice?" I asked softly, holding my breath.

Hugging her cardigan around her, Jessie started talking, her head nodding gently as she remembered.

"He and Alice were together since school. Like two peas in a pod they were. Always had their heads down poring over some book or other. Gabriel was the youngest of the three you see, and they were in a different phase of life when he was born. So he and Alice were like brother and sister, even more so after Gabriel's mother died. His father was quite stern, never let anyone close to him. I became like Gabriel's mum and Jack, that's my late brother, Gabriel's granddad, was like a dad to him. It's he who gave him his first telescope and got him interested in the stars. Funny that, because the telescope and the stars became Gabriel's whole life, but in the end that's what pulled him away from Alice."

Jessie paused and got up to poke at the logs in the grate, releasing little flurries of sparks. The room was warm and cosy with the smell of wood from the fire and the musky smell of the bright yellow flowers on the mantelpiece.

After offering me a cup of tea with some home baked biscuits, she continued. "When Gabriel and Alice got older, they naturally seemed to drift into a relationship. Alice was six years younger than Gabriel and she adored him. They would go swimming together. Often went to one of the beaches nearby here. Gabriel liked to swim in the sea. Didn't hold with these indoor swimming pools. I think he liked the feeling that he could conquer nature. To watch them swimming together – Gabriel was like Hercules, fighting the waves and beating them, arms thrashing like swords. And Alice, she was like a fish, like she was part of the sea, like it was her home. They would pick me up and I would go with them sometimes, on an outing. She would almost melt into the waves and her strokes flowed with the rise and fall of the crests. I think it was this difference between them that broke them in the end. Gabriel wanted his independence and she wanted to be a part of him."

She poured another cup of tea. "They moved in together but he was busy climbing the ladder at the university. Totally into his sightings and his research, he was. Often he was out late at night making calculations and viewing the universe. I could understand that. For a young boy alone, and later a young man alone in his head, to understand the universe must be like understanding God himself."

I wondered what Gabriel would think of this idea after the conversations we'd had about religion.

"But Alice didn't understand," Jessie continued, "She became more and more clingy. Jealous. Complaining that he had no time for her. And in the end he left her."

"She was a fragile girl, Alice. Fragile to look at and fragile in her spirit. Just like Gabriel lost his Mum at a young age, she lost both her parents and was brought up by an aunt who didn't like her much and cousins who didn't understand her. So Gabriel was her lifeline."

"And Gabriel didn't feel the same?" I asked.

"Oh, I think he loved her," she said, "but in his own way. He needed his time alone and his privacy, and that isn't always easy for a woman in love."

I nodded, remembering the conversation in Sutherland where he had said: “Don’t try to possess me.”

Jessie settled back into her chair. “He understood her soul, Alice once told me. Well, I don’t know about that, but I do know it’s not a good thing to get so hooked on one person. When he left her, she fell apart. She was a school teacher, kindergarten, really good with the kids and she didn’t go to work for two weeks after it happened. When she did go back it was like she was a ghost of her previous self. She got even thinner so that if you saw her walking across the Downs to her home, it looked like the wind could blow her away.”

“What did Gabriel do?” I asked.

“He came and spoke to me. Asked me to keep an eye on her. Thought about going back to her, he did, but he couldn’t. The feelings had gone and all he felt was stifled. You can’t martyr yourself to someone else’s needs, I told him. They tried to be just friends for a while but that didn’t work out either. Then one night she tried to kill herself. Took an overdose of tranquillisers. She must have been hoarding them up for a while because they found lots of little bottles from different doctors. She’d taken them all. Gabriel found her. He’d got home and found a message from her on his answering machine. Couldn’t quite hear her words but her voice sounded strange and she ended off saying goodbye. He rushed over and found her unconscious. She wasn’t dead, not then. At the hospital they said that she’d had a loss of oxygen to her brain and she was in a coma, but her heart was still beating strong. Gabriel was by her bed every day and at one point it looked like she might come round. I don’t know what he’d have done if she did – gone back to her out of guilt perhaps. Anyway, after two weeks of hanging on, she finally died.”

“Did you see Gabriel during that time?” I asked.

“Yes, I saw him, though he was mostly at the hospital. He was devastated. Blamed himself, of course. Blamed himself for leaving her. Blamed himself for not seeing it coming. Blamed himself for being selfish and wanting to live his own life. But the worst was yet to come. Alice’s aunt, the one who’d never liked her and like as not had hardly seen her in a

year, decided to go for Gabriel. She went to the press and spilled the beans to them about how this big knob university professor – Gabriel had just got the appointment a few months ago after some big research he'd done – had taken advantage of her poor niece and driven her to kill herself."

"The next day when Gabriel opened his door, there were cameras in his face and his whole driveway was full of reporters with microphones pushing questions at him and clicking flashes. And sure enough the papers were full of it for the next week."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"He went into hiding," she said. "Gabriel looks like a strong man, and he is. But deep down he still feels the abandonment of his father and one thing he can't stand is people prying into his private life. So he came to me first and stayed here a day or two. Then he left, said he was going to stay with a friend nearby. And next we heard he'd gone off to South Africa."

As she finished her story, my mind spun. Was it that memory that had made him run this time? Where would he have run to as he obviously hadn't come to his aunt?

"Who was the friend?" I asked.

"I don't know. Thought it might have been that Malcolm, Scottish guy he was friends with from varsity. Photographer. But turns out he was in South Africa at the time. Maybe that's where Gabriel heard about the job. "

Malcolm? She must mean Mouse. Strange I had never known his real name.

"Do you have any idea where he could be, Mrs Brenton?" I asked.

She shook her head. "He did say something about visiting me soon, so I reckon he could be in the country."

"Would he go to Alice's aunt?"

"Can't think he'd do that. No love lost between them."

"Where is Alice buried?" I asked.

"She's buried at Bedminster Cemetery. Quite close to here," she said.

"Any other friends he might go and stay with?"

She shook her head. "Can't think of any."

I thanked her and rose to leave. "He did tell me about you," she said as we reached the door. "He wrote regularly. He was good at that. And in his last few letters he mentioned this young lady he'd met. How he wasn't sure he was ready for anything or whether he even should try a relationship again, but how he was so drawn to you. I told him to follow his heart." She laughed. "He wrote back and said he wasn't sure he knew where to find it, seeing as how he'd locked it up and hidden away the key."

"One last thing before I leave, Mrs Brenton, what was Alice's surname?"

"Croxley, same as her aunt," she said. Promising to keep in contact, I walked down the steep incline of Vale Street, my calves aching at the resistance.

A thought had come to mind as I was leaving. I wanted to visit Alice's grave. I took a bus going in the direction of town centre and asked the conductor to tell me when we got to the Bedminster stop. Early dusk was already falling as I walked into the cemetery. A small office near the gate was open and I knocked on the window. An elderly man came to the door and I asked him where I could find Alice Croxley's grave. As I walked down the rows of neat gravestones to the plot to which he'd directed me I wondered again whether Gabriel was in Bristol. As I reached the grave my heart started to pound. In a long vase at the base of the gravestone stood a bunch of St Joseph's lilies. Gabriel's favourite flower. They were starting to fade, probably three or four days old. He was here. He was in Bristol. Now all I had to do was find him.

Another knock on another strange door, this time a bright blue door of a semi-detached house in Redlands, where I stood apprehensively contemplating what my reception would be like. The door was opened by a taciturn woman in her seventies.

"Mrs Croxley?" I asked.

"Yes, who are you?"

"I'm Dr Brown. I'm an acquaintance of Gabriel Powell's. I wonder if I might come in for a minute."

“Only if you’re here to tell me the bastard’s dead,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron and smearing it with flour.

“Well, he may be.” A white lie to gain entrance.

“What’s this about then?” She led me down a gloomy passage into a small room with a round table and four chairs. There was a bowl with plastic flowers on the table and curtains which had once been violet hung lopsidedly at the window. She didn’t offer me a seat.

“He was working in South Africa and now he’s disappeared after some bad publicity,” I said.

“Right disappearing act he is. Disappeared from my Alice’s home, left her in the lurch.”

“I was wondering if you knew where he went to after he left Alice,” I asked.

“Who knows, probably to that floozy he’d taken up with,” she sneered. My palms prickled with sweat.

“Do you know who she was?” I asked slowly and deliberately.

“Regina someone. Regina... Price, that’s what it was. Worked with him at the university. Incestuous lot they are. Supposedly doing research but instead he was betraying my Alice. That’s what killed her, it did.”

When he opened the door I saw immediately how thin and gaunt he had become. His face was strained and pale. For a moment relief flooded through me and for a moment I thought that he was going to catch me up in his arms, but the curtain came down quickly over the green eyes. A sigh and a grimace escaped from his mouth.

“You’re quite the detective, aren’t you. How on earth...”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter.” I reached out to touch his arm. “Are you all right?”

“You shouldn’t have come, Lena.”

“Why not? I thought the last words you said to me were that you loved me.”

“It’s too late for that now.” He turned away into the house, leaving the door swinging open. I followed him into a narrow study with a window

looking out onto a small garden. He was standing with his back to me, looking out, and I was reminded of the time at his flat where he'd done the same thing. That evening had ended with passion and kisses and I wondered where this one would go.

"Did you do it?" I asked softly.

"What does it matter?" he said.

"It matters to me."

"You should go back home and carry on with your life as though you'd never met me. That's what I intended."

"Well you're not in this on your own," anger prickled suddenly, "it's not your relationship to decide on on your own. I'm part of it too and I have a right to know."

He turned wearily to face me. "I can never beat you in an argument, can I? No I didn't do it."

"Then we'll fight it. We'll fight it together."

"There's no use," he said. "I was careless. I didn't realise how much Philip hated me and what lengths he would go to to destroy me. He's got a number of people on his side."

"Like Sergei?" I asked.

"Like Sergei. But others too, whom I trusted. They've got the data so muddled up that it will be almost impossible to prove the authenticity of my work."

"Then you can start again. Do the calculations again."

He gave a wry smile. "Hard to do that when I've been suspended pending a disciplinary hearing," he said.

"But you made yourself look guilty by running away like that. I'm sure you can fight it. Your brother will help. Give you legal advice."

"You've seen Barry?"

"Yes."

"My God, you are persistent Lena. God knows I don't deserve you."

"I deserve to know why you left without telling me anything. Why you didn't call."

"You were in the middle of nowhere, remember. Out of contact."

“Rubbish. Mouse managed to get hold of me.”

“Good old Mouse.” Gabriel lifted a hand to run his fingers through his hair.

“He’s worried sick, you know.”

“I’d have contacted him in due course.”

“But not me?”

“No.” My heart sank. “You and I are over, Lena. I’m sorry.”

“No, you don’t get to do this without an explanation. I won’t leave until you’ve explained yourself.”

“What do you want to know that I haven’t told you?”

“Tell me about Alice. I’ve seen your aunt and Alice’s aunt and they’ve told me their versions. Now I want yours.”

He walked over to me and finally sat down, balancing his foot on the protruding leg of the coffee table, an achingly familiar posture.

“Aunt Jessie would have told you about how Alice and I were together since we were young and how we later moved in together, how Alice depended on me and how I felt claustrophobic and left her.”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“And no doubt Mrs Croxley told you that I had betrayed Alice with Regina.”

“Did you?”

He got up and paced around the small room, finally turning and half sitting on the desk in the corner, his hands holding onto the wooden curves beside him. His knuckles stood out white against the dark mahogany.

“Alice was a beautiful soul. She was too good for this world,” he sighed. “She always thought the best of people, always wanted the best for people. At school we were like one person, we played the same sports, read the same books, listened to the same music. But then I fell in love with astronomy and Alice came second. She could not understand this and she clung to me more and more. I felt trapped. I felt so trapped.” He looked at me despairingly. “I tried and tried but in the end I felt like I was going to explode if I stayed with her. So I left. Regina came later. But Alice heard about this and realised that any chance of us getting back together was

over. She left me a note. It was beside her hand that night when I found her. I never showed it to anyone. I killed her, she said. She died the day I left her.”

I reached for his hand again but he walked away. “I cannot be responsible for anyone’s life again.”

“I’m not Alice,” I said.

A trace of the old smile played across his face. “That I know,” he said emphatically.

“And Regina? This is her house? You’re back with her?”

I felt the world spinning around me as I waited for his answer. I had focussed for these past two weeks on finding Gabriel. I had not thought what I would find when I did. I had thought about his guilt or innocence of the fraud and what that meant in terms of my trusting him. I hadn’t thought about what it meant that he’d left without contacting me. I hadn’t thought about finding him and finding this stranger of a man.

He laughed bitterly. “This is Regina’s house, but she’s not here. She’s overseas on sabbatical for a few months. She said I could stay here while she was away. I needed somewhere where no-one would find me.”

“Don’t worry,” he continued, “I’m not fit to inflict myself on anyone at the moment.”

I struggled to keep my balance and to stop the large lump which was clogging my throat. His eyes softened momentarily and he squeezed my hand briefly.

“It is better this way, Lena.” He pulled me into his arms and breathed into my hair as though he were finding relief in the feeling. “I meant it when I said I loved you. But I am not that man anymore. My life is broken and you have no part in that.”

I pulled away from him and put my lips to his. For a moment he responded then he broke away.

“Gabriel, this is ridiculous. I love you. We can work this out together.”

He shook his head.

Desperately, biting back the tears, I said: "It's three days to the eclipse. We all have tickets booked. Meet me there." I turned and walked away praying that he would be there.

3.

Mouse met me on Rhodes. He and Marissa had phoned me virtually every day since I had given the news that Gabriel was in Bristol. Mouse had tried to phone Gabriel after I had seen him, but had had no answer to his calls. The flight from London had taken three hours. From Rhodes it was another four hours by ferry to Kastelorizo. When we had planned this trip, I had specifically suggested this route rather than flying straight to the island. It had seemed the dream journey. One I'd fantasised for several weeks that I would be spending with Gabriel.

"Geez, Lena, what a mess," Mouse said, hugging me as we met under the Greek sun. "What did he say? What about the fraud story?"

I told him briefly what Gabriel had said about Philip plotting against him and how they had muddled his data.

"But, running away, Lena," he exploded, "and not telling you or me or anyone!" The roar of a departing aeroplane drowned the last words.

"You say he's staying at Regina's place?" he continued. "I knew nothing about him and Regina. I was away out of the country on a project – in Cape Town actually – when Alice died, so I only heard the story later. In fact, I heard it from Gabriel when he phoned me to say he was looking at a job in Cape Town. I knew her, of course. Knew her well. We all spent a lot of time together in the early days." He hoisted my bag into his hand as we headed out of the airport building to find a taxi to take us to the ferry to Kastelorizo.

"How did you leave it with him?" he asked.

"I told him I would be at the eclipse site as we'd arranged and asked him to meet me there."

Mouse licked his lip, pondering. "From what he's said to me, Lena, you're the best thing that ever happened to him. I hope he'll see that and be there."

The ferry crossing was long. The hot sun beat down on the deep blue water which was smooth as a sheet. The ferry glided along occasionally scudding against some white foam crests. As we coasted in to Kastelorizo harbour we were greeted by rows and rows of whitewashed houses with brightly coloured doors and shuttered windows. The old homes lay close together giving each other protection and shade. Between them purple flowered bushes blossomed and stretched out to the hills behind them. Small sailing boats bobbed against the quay and on the jetty yellow fishing nets lay in heaps, their brown cork floaters sticking from their surfaces like cow udders. The ferry slunk into port and we all disembarked. Normally I was sure, the island would be spacious and empty. Today the little winding alleys were crowded with eclipse watchers. We walked along the almost non-existent roads to the small B&B which Mouse had booked. After an early dinner of olives and mezé and a flask of Greek white wine in a pretty taverna I went to bed early, trying to calm my head and my heart in preparation for whatever might happen tomorrow. Mouse had to prepare his equipment for the next day.

It is morning in Kastelorizo and the eclipse has begun. Pera Meria, the western quay of the island, is bathed in thin mist and a few clouds scudder across the sky. I am standing on a rock, juggling a camera in my hands. On the beach, boats are jogging on the water, filled with eclipse chasers. In the distance, Mouse sets up his equipment and is testing leads and focus. The Sun looks like a half moon with the black bite taken out of it. As the Moon's shadow creeps further across, dusk falls. Dusk at midday. The opposite side of the bright moon at night in Lubombo. There are no forest animals here, but there are birds and goats and an occasional dog. The birds fall silent. The goats huddle together to sleep. The dogs slink off, tails between their legs. Palm-leaved trees cast shadows on the ground and my rock darkens and grows cold beneath me.

I am back in the days of ancient Greece where eclipses were due to anger from the gods, where Odysseus was freed from his captors because of an eclipse, where prisoners were released for fear of retribution. Where

Roman Caesar shook in fear and called for his augurer and where ships at sea, cast suddenly into darkness, fell into disarray. The disc of the sun goes black. The corona rings it in blazing light and the world inverts. Solar streams sear the sky and catch startled dust droplets in their beams, freezing them in slow motion. The world goes silent. Even the chattering tourists are still. It is like standing on a dead planet and in this night-day, leaves scatter in the wind.

I look for you in this unreality. If you are still mine you will be here. Boats bob in the darkness, dust settles like grey ash and I do not see you.

The black moon- sun moves, a diamond ring now with a flash of light on one side. There will be no diamond ring for us today. Are you trapped in your uncertainty and fear? Do you choose the dead darkness which is known rather than risk the lightning bolt which may bring death or ecstasy?

The light is coming back now and a rooster crows somewhere in the distance. The world is returning to normal and this small chance is slipping away. Around me strands of music weave, wrapping themselves around my head. I cannot think. My mind has popped and pink and orange scarves drift around me shining with fireflies. Are these ghosts or are they the echo of your kiss replaying itself to me. The ghost of your kiss silvers my lips like a ray of starlight. Lightly floating across it, stroking so lightly that only the change in temperature can be felt. A faint trace of mint hovers in the air, almost an imagination. Silent as a shadow. You are so close now inside my head, yet the space inside me shivers with your absence.